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The Olympic Movement and peacekeeping: is sport neutrality serving sport values?

Report[1]
Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media
Rapporteur: Mr Mogens JENSEN, Denmark, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

Contents **Page**

A. Draft resolution 2
B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Mogens Jensen, rapporteur 4
1. Introduction 4
2. The contested (and "neutral"?) 2024 Paris Games and beyond 5
3. Sport neutrality, politics and ethical considerations 6
4. Reaffirming the role of the Olympic Movement as a tool for peace and democratic progress 9
4.1. The crucial and undervalued role of the Olympic Truce 9
4.2. Preventing a martial attitude to sport and protecting sport's essence and values 10
4.3. Political neutrality and athletes' freedom of speech aimed at championing the values of the Olympic Charter 11
5. Final recommendations and proposals to amend the Olympic Charter to fully support the goal of Olympism 12

1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15721, Reference 4716 of 2 March 2023.

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. Sport and the Olympic Movement can play an essential role in preserving peace and promoting internationally recognised human rights standards and democracy. The Parliamentary Assembly commends the central role of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in bringing together key stakeholders of the global sports arena to achieve these goals, while seeking to overcome differences.

2. The neutrality and autonomy of sport should enable sports institutions to fulfil their mission and safeguard sporting values effectively, without fear of undue pressure or interference. While the complex and ever-evolving relationships between the State and sports bodies, both at national and international levels, blur the clear separation between politics and sport, the Assembly believes that these two fundamental principles must be recognised and duly respected by public authorities, and that the sport movement should assume the responsibilities deriving from them. However, these principles should be properly understood and implemented in accordance with the above-mentioned goals and values of the Olympic Movement.

3. The Assembly acknowledges that the Olympic Charter refers to the respect of internationally recognised human rights, but their prevalence is not always stated with sufficient force by the sports governing bodies and, despite the many statements and declarations, both their protection in practice and their enforcement still lack consistency and effectiveness.

4. The principles of neutrality and autonomy of sport should serve peace, uphold democratic principles and champion human rights; they cannot justify inertia or wavering reactions when peace, democracy and human rights are threatened, vilified or *de facto* denied.

5. The Assembly recalls that while the Olympic Charter has constitutional significance and value for the sports movement, it is not superior to international conventions and treaties: the obligation to fully respect international human rights standards must take precedence over the need to ensure the political neutrality of sport, and the concept of autonomy of sport does not shield sports organisations from accountability when they fail to protect human dignity and human rights.

6. The Assembly wishes to encourage the Olympic Movement and the IOC to strengthen the link between sport and humanitarian law and, in particular, to reinforce the collective commitment to fostering a peaceful and co-operative global environment during the Olympic Games. Any country engaged in active warfare or armed conflict must commit to at least a temporary cessation of hostilities for the duration of the Olympic Games and must be held immediately accountable for any violation of the Olympic Truce.

7. Participation in the Olympic Games and other major sports competitions, the hosting of these events and the celebration of the victories of national teams and athletes are used by some governments as a means of asserting their power and gaining influence and prestige to consolidate it. This approach negates the very idea of the neutrality of sport. The Assembly firmly condemns any martial attitude towards sport which seeks to publicly demonstrate economic and political supremacy alongside sporting primacy, and even to present autocratic forms of government as an alternative to democratic governance, which is incompatible with the values enshrined in the Olympic Charter.

8. To avoid this approach, sports governing bodies cannot solely rely on the National Olympic Committees, especially when they do not appear to be autonomous but under government control. Increased scrutiny and the establishment of an independent monitoring system are essential to strengthen the IOC's ability to gather information on the actual respect of the values it proclaims.

9. Athletes are key players and powerful allies in the implementation of the Olympic Charter and its values; they must abide by political neutrality, but this principle and the sport regulations enacted to ensure that it is observed should not prevent them from supporting peace or condemning human rights violations and cannot justify punishing them for doing so.

10. Neither democratic governments or international organisations, nor athletes or sports governing bodies can remain silent and passive, in the name of the neutrality and autonomy of sport, when faced with serious human rights violations.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 7 April 2025.

11. The Assembly agrees that athletes should not be held responsible for their governments' behaviour and that the right of athletes to participate in sports competitions must be preserved as far as possible. However, if a government seriously violates the Olympic principles and values of sport, the athletes of that country should only be allowed to participate in the Olympic Games or major sporting events organised by international sports federations as neutral athletes under the Olympic banner.

12. In addition, exceptional circumstances may require stronger measures, including a total ban on athletes from a given country. This should be the case when, on the one hand, such a ban is necessary to protect other human rights which may override the right of individual athletes to participate in sporting events and when, on the other hand, it is practically impossible for the athletes concerned to dissociate themselves from the actions of their governments, including because their right to freely express criticism is denied by their countries' authoritarian and repressive regimes.

13. This is the case in the Russian Federation and Belarus, where not only are virtually all high-level athletes State employees and/or financially supported by the State, but where there is no freedom of expression, and where taking a stand against the government would put an athlete at risk of losing their profession, livelihood and social status and even being imprisoned. Moreover, in these countries, sport is clearly a tool of soft power for the government and is being misused to generate acceptance, if not support, for the war of aggression against Ukraine, notwithstanding the appalling massive human rights violations and clear threat to the international legal order that this war has unleashed.

14. In light of the above, the Assembly calls on the International Olympic Committee to:

14.1. reinforce the provisions of the Olympic Charter which commit the IOC and its members to respect and protect human dignity and internationally recognised human rights;

14.2. establish the Olympic Truce as a necessary condition for a country's participation in the Olympic Games, and include in the Olympic Charter and other relevant IOC regulations the necessary provisions to effectively enforce the obligation to respect the Olympic Truce;

14.3. introduce, in the Olympic Charter, a provision stating that a martial attitude to sport is incompatible with Olympism and sporting values, and reinforce the obligation of national sports institutions, particularly the National Olympic Committees, to operate under conditions of strict independence and autonomy;

14.4. set up, in co-operation with human rights organisations, a robust monitoring system, such as an independent commission supported by independent experts, with investigative powers to evaluate and pronounce upon human rights violations and infringements of sporting values within the Olympic Movement, including the manipulative use of sport by a government;

14.5. amend Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter to specify that political neutrality does not prevent athletes from supporting peace or condemning human rights violations.

15. With a view to strengthen the rule of law within the Olympic Movement and the IOC, the Assembly recommends the establishment of an independent and impartial sports judicial body to ensure the consistent interpretation and implementation of the Olympic Charter and its fundamental principles by all sports governing bodies.

16. Finally, the Assembly trusts that the IOC and its newly elected President are firmly committed to promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms and to placing sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind with a view to promoting a peaceful society. In this context, the Assembly welcomes the IOC as an institutional partner of the newly established Parliamentary Alliance for Good Governance and Integrity in Sport and invites the IOC to consider entering into a memorandum of understanding with the Council of Europe.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Mogens Jensen, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. The present report stems from a motion for resolution tabled by Mr Indrek Saar (Estonia, SOC) and other members of the Parliamentary Assembly entitled "Excluding the athletes and officials of the Russian Federation and Belarus from participating in the international Olympic movement".[3]

2. On 28 March 2023, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) issued recommendations for International Sports Federations (IFs) and international sports events organisers to allow individual athletes from Russia and Belarus to compete under strict eligibility conditions as "neutrals", provided they did not support the war in Ukraine and were not affiliated with the military. No flag, anthem, colours or any other identification whatsoever of Russia or Belarus would be displayed and no Russian or Belarusian government or State officials would be invited or accredited.[4] However, the actual implementation of the eligibility conditions has been contested by several IFs which led to divergent positions in different sports.

3. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media held a public hearing on 25 April 2023[5] and, subsequently, the Assembly Standing Committee held a current affairs debate on "Excluding athletes from Russia and Belarus from taking part in the Olympics" on 26 May 2023, in Riga.[6]

4. An urgent debate, requested by the five political groups, entitled "War of aggression against Ukraine – Participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes in the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympics?" took place on 22 June 2023, during the Assembly third part-session.[7]

5. Resolution 2507 (2023) adopted then issued a strong call to all National Olympic Committees (NOCs) representatives and national and international sports federations to express their opposition to the IOC's proposal to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to participate in the 2024 Games. The report analysed and responded to the key arguments put forward to justify the removal of the ban and the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes, concluding that such participation, though under strict conditions of "neutrality", was not acceptable.

6. On 12 October 2023, the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media decided to change the title of this report to "Olympic movement and peacekeeping: is sport neutrality serving sport values?", with a view to providing a follow up to Resolution 2507 (2023) as well as to Resolutions MSL17(2022)10 "Sport for all: uniting us for stronger societies"[8] and MSL18(2024)05 "Collaborative governing and good governance in sport: supporting a fresh approach to match its societal importance",[9] broadening the scope of the analysis and discussing the role of the international sport movement in upholding fundamental values, human rights and peace.

7. On 5 December 2023, the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media held a hearing with the participation of Mr Luigi Melica, Professor of Comparative Public Law, University of Salento, Italy, and Mr Bernard Hilgers, Treasurer of the European Olympic Academies.

8. On 8 December 2023, the IOC Executive Board eventually took its stance, approving the participation of individual neutral athletes qualified through the IFs' qualification systems.[10] Some athletes accepted their Olympic invitations but withdrew weeks before the Games began, while others were contested during the Games.[11]

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3. Doc. 15721. This motion for a resolution was tabled in the wake of a current affairs debate entitled "Supporting Ukraine one year since the beginning of the Russian Federation's large-scale war of aggression: the role of the Council of Europe", held at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Assembly of 2 and 3 March 2023, in The Hague.
4. "Following a request by the 11th Olympic Summit, IOC issues recommendations for International Federations and international sports event organisers on the participation of athletes with a Russian or Belarusian passport in international competitions", Olympics.com, 28 March 2023.
5. The video of the hearing is available here.
6. Standing Committee (26 May 2023).
7. See Doc. 15795, report of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, rapporteur: Ms Linda Hofstad Helleland, Norway, EPP/CD.
8. Adopted at the 17th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Sport, Antalya, Türkiye, 26 October 2022.
9. Adopted at the 18th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Sport, Porto, Portugal, 8-10 October 2024.
10. "Strict eligibility conditions in place as IOC EB approves Individual Neutral Athletes for the Olympic Games Paris 2024", Olympics.com, 8 December 2023.

9. In this context, the report, while providing for a follow-up to Resolution 2507 (2023), will mostly focus on the relationship and the tension between the principles of sport neutrality and the role of sport in preserving peace and in defending and supporting universal values, as enshrined in the Olympic Charter.

10. This requires examining the complex and ever-evolving relationship between politics and international sport, as well as the essence of the Olympic Movement as an important catalyst for peace and democracy, which were the subject of two further hearings organised by the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media in 2024.[12]

11. On 4 December 2024, in Paris, the committee discussed the expert report prepared by Professor Melica,[13] with the participation of Mr Guido Battaglia, Head of Partnerships and Institutional Affairs at the Centre for Sport and Human Rights in Geneva.

12. Unfortunately, despite repeated requests, it has not yet been possible to meet with representatives of the IOC, or to hear their views during committee meetings, but upon consultation, IOC officials have kindly provided their observations to the draft report, which I have included in the following chapters.

13. On 20 March 2025, Kirsty Coventry, former Chair of the IOC Athletes' Commission, was elected as the 10th President of the IOC,[14] becoming the first woman and the first from the African continent to hold the position. This comes at a time of heightened geopolitical tensions and discussions over the direction of the Olympic movement on deeply divisive issues such as neutrality, participation, the growing clout of authoritarian regimes, gender eligibility rules, environmental concerns, the advance of artificial intelligence in sport, among others, with the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games under the new US administration looming on the horizon.

2. The contested (and "neutral"?) 2024 Paris Games and beyond

14. In September 2023, the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration looked forward to the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2024 "as a symbol of peace, dialogue amongst nations and inclusivity, with participation of all".[15]

15. Welcoming the statement, IOC President, Thomas Bach, accused "deplorable" European governments of "double standards" and questioned why they had not commented on the participation of athletes whose countries were involved in the other 70 wars, armed conflicts and crises in the world.

16. Mr Bach deplored the failure to respect the majority within the Olympic Movement or the autonomy of sport, which European governments are requesting from other countries, whilst completely disregarding the statement of the two special rapporteurs from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), based on the non-discrimination principle. He claimed that "political interventions" had only "strengthened the unity of the Olympic Movement".[16]

17. As we have stressed, Mr Bach's reproaches are not entirely accurate. On the one hand, sport autonomy is not hampered by those who voice dissenting views and urge the IOC to favour a different course of action, as democratic European countries do. On the other hand, sport autonomy is certainly threatened when State authorities of a dictatorship have full control on national sports bodies and, *de facto*, decide their policies, as is the case in Russia and Belarus. The Assembly did reply to the statement of the two special

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11. "Russian and Belarusian Olympic athletes accused of supporting war in Ukraine", *The Guardian*, Paris Olympic Games 2024, 23 July 2024.
12. 21 March 2024, Paris: exchange of views with the participation of Mr Jean-Pierre Siutat, Vice-President of the French National and Olympic Sports Committee (CNOSF), in charge of international relations. 27 May 2024, Copenhagen: hearing with the participation of Mr Hans Natorp, President of the Danish Sports Confederation, Denmark; Mr Jörg Krieger, Associate Professor, Chair of the Sport & Society Research Network, Department of Public Health, Aarhus University, Denmark; and Mr Antonio Di Marco, Teaching Professor of European Union Law, University of Strasbourg, France.
13. Professor Luigi Melica, "Olympic Movement and peacekeeping: is sport neutrality serving sport values?", University of Salento, Italy.
14. Kirsty Coventry will take office on 23 June 2025, Olympic Day, for an eight-year term, with a possible four-year renewal.
15. Declaration by the Heads of State and Government of the G20 in New Delhi.
16. Q&A regarding the participation of athletes with a Russian or Belarusian passport in international competitions: What is the reaction of the international community and political leaders to the IOC's approach to the question of participation by athletes with a Russian or Belarusian passport in international competitions?, Olympics.com, (modified on 25 October 2023).

rapporteurs from the UN Human Rights Council and explained in detail, through Ms Helleland's report,[17] why we could not follow their reasoning on the non-discrimination principle, to which we are certainly wholeheartedly attached.

18. Speaking before the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media in Copenhagen, Jörg Krieger, Chair of the Sport & Society Research Network at Aarhus University, highlighted that the IOC had also decided to exclude Russian and Belarusian individual team sport athletes. Thus, while the IOC provided a rationale for this decision (which, of course, we welcomed), it confirms that the non-discrimination argument does not necessarily apply to all athletes after all and shows that more complex reasoning might be necessary to find the right course of action depending on the circumstances.

19. The IOC referred to the view of an "overwhelming majority" of athletes, the communiqué of the latest Olympic Summit, consultations with relevant stakeholders, as well as the UN General Assembly Resolution A/78/10 about the Olympic Truce for Paris 2024. It also reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Ukrainian athletes through the dedicated Solidarity Fund.[18]

20. Just a few weeks later, on 12 October 2023, the IOC Executive Board was forced to suspend the Russian Olympic Committee due to its decision to include regional sports organisations that are under the authority of the Ukrainian National Olympic Committee, in breach of the Olympic Charter.[19]

21. The implementation of the eligibility conditions has been contested by some IFs,[20] which have taken divergent stances from the IOC position. Indeed, it was quite hard (and I would say "naïve") to reasonably expect that Russian athletes could distance themselves from the war, due to the political situation in the country, where freedom of expression is at present non-existent and anyone voicing disagreement is threatened, jailed and, if too troublesome, eventually eliminated.

22. Russia did not broadcast the Olympic Games on national television (it last refused to air the Olympics in 1984, when the Soviet Union boycotted the Summer Games held in the United States),[21] and a number of politicians and media figures have even described those athletes competing in Paris as traitors. Some Russian athletes competed despite supporting the war in Ukraine via social media, which stirred further protests during the summer,[22] also demonstrating that sport neutrality is an unrealistic goal which, moreover, is seldom interpreted and implemented in the same way by all stakeholders.

23. In March 2025, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin reportedly discussed a potential hockey match alongside talks on the war in Ukraine and President Trump may back Russia's participation in the 2026 World Cup and 2028 Olympic Games.[23]

24. In an interview, the newly elected IOC President, Kirsty Coventry, asserted that her primary focus was to ensure inclusivity: "Our duty as the IOC is to ensure that all athletes can participate in the Games. It's not just about the major wars and conflicts happening in Europe and the Middle East: there are also wars and conflicts in Africa. How are we going to protect and support these athletes? (…) If elected IOC president, I will establish a working group tasked with developing a set of guidelines to help us navigate these periods of conflict, prioritising the interests of athletes". Among these pressing issues is also the participation of Russian athletes in the 2026 Winter Games in Milano Cortina.[24]

3. Sport neutrality, politics and ethical considerations

25. The IOC is keen to stress that the principles of autonomy and political neutrality are at the core of the Olympic Movement and must be unequivocally respected. The mission of the Olympic Games is to unite the world, ensuring the universality of sport, its values and rules, as well as the integrity of sports competitions.

17. Doc. 15795 op. cit.
18. "Strict eligibility conditions in place as IOC EB approves Individual Neutral Athletes for the Olympic Games Paris 2024", Olympics.com, 8 December 2023.
19. "IOC Executive Board suspends Russian Olympic Committee with immediate effect", Olympics.com, 12 October 2023.
20. Most notably World Athletics.
21. "Paris Olympics: Russian media won't show the games on TV", *AP News*, 27 July 2024.
22. "Trio of Russian athletes competing in Paris 2024 despite supporting war in Ukraine", *POLITICO*, 27 July 2024.
23. "Putin's ice hockey diplomacy reveals lasting scars of sport's soft power", *The Guardian*, 20 March 2025.
24. "Kirsty Coventry interview: The IOC's first woman president and Africa's most-decorated Olympian", *The Athletic*,18 March 2025*; "*Coventry's win renews Russia's expectations", *Inside the Games*, 21 March 2025.

This can only be achieved if the event remains above political conflicts and external political interference, and sports federations and NOCs are solely responsible to decide which athletes can take part in international competitions, purely based on their sporting merit.

26. The IOC commitment to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, is enshrined in the Olympic Charter, the IOC Code of Ethics and the IOC Strategic Framework on Human Rights, in line with international standards. Amendments to the Olympic Charter further reinforced this commitment by embedding human rights in the Fundamental Principles of Olympism (Principles of Olympism 1 and 4) and ensuring that human rights principles are upheld in the selection process and in the organisation and delivery of the Olympic Games. This support includes guidance, tools, assistance with stakeholder engagement, technical review and other forms of engagement to ensure the effective implementation of human rights principles throughout the Games.

27. The concept of sport neutrality needs clarification along with the relevance of human rights in the Olympic Movement, bearing in mind its noble goal "to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity".[25]

28. Professor Melica's analysis of 13 different revisions of the Charter between 1978 and 1990 explains how sport and the Olympic Games came to be understood as an instrument for peace, with the emergence of new democracies.[26]

29. An explicit reference to peace was included in the Charter after the 1956 Hungarian revolution, which led to several boycotts of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games,[27] to protest against the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union.[28]

30. The concept of political neutrality itself was first applied in the 1990s. From 2007 onwards, countries such as the Russian Federation and Qatar were excluded from the Winter or Summer Olympics due to serious human rights violations.

31. The principle of neutrality in sport was formally introduced in 2019, prior to the Winter Olympics in China and the Football World Championships in Qatar, where many demonstrations were repressed.

32. This was likely due to the need to put an end to the wave of protests in the world of sport against human rights violations in some countries chosen by the IOC or the sports federations to host major sporting events.[29]

33. This was done in the hope that sports competitions would become an important catalyst for political reform and economic growth, which highlights a contradiction with the supposed neutrality of sport. A further contradiction stems from the fact that sport can be and is (mis)used as a tool of soft power to distract from questionable political or humanitarian reputations and to reshape a country's image.

34. Speaking in Paris before the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, Bernard Hilgers acknowledged that the political neutrality of sport is a universal fundamental ethical principle of the Olympic Movement, enshrined in the IOC Code of Ethics together with the principle of universality (Article 1.2) and part of Fundamental Principle 5 of Olympism. Sport should transcend international politics and crises, and the Games can only contribute to peace through a fundamental commitment to political neutrality and universality, and through solidarity. He admitted though that the growing politicisation of sport prevented sporting events, including the Olympic Games or the World Championships, from fulfilling their mission.

35. Historical examples of peacemaking through sport include "Ping Pong diplomacy" between China and the US, "cricket diplomacy" between India and Pakistan and South Africa's rugby-driven reconciliation.

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25. Fundamental principle 2 of the Olympic Charter.
26. See also Luigi Melica, "Reammissione degli atleti russi e bielorussi e interpretazione della Carta Olimpica" (pending publication).
27. Boycott by the Olympic Committees of the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland.
28. Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon did not participate in protest against France, Great Britain and Israel for the military occupation of the Suez Canal. China also boycotted in protest over Taiwan's permission to participate in the Games as a separate country.
29. In the 2000-2018 period, the Russian Federation hosted the 2013 World Athletics Championships, the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 Football World Championships; China hosted the 2008 Olympic Games and the 2022 Winter Olympic Games; and Qatar hosted the 2022 Football World Championships.

36. For the past two decades, the IOC has claimed to pursue an athlete-centred approach based on the core values of unity, solidarity and non-discrimination. The focus has shifted towards the right to take part in sports events as part of the right to take part in cultural life, as well as the fundamental principle that the Olympic Games are competitions between athletes as individuals or teams and not between countries, as enshrined in the Olympic Charter.

37. Furthermore, the IOC holds that athletes cannot be responsible for the individual behaviour of their governments and that sanctions can only concern governments (by banning the national flag, the national anthem and the country's leadership). According to the IOC, only in this way is discrimination possible and a total ban is inadmissible.

38. While I have no difficulty in agreeing on the principle that individual athletes cannot be held directly accountable for what their respective governments do, I do not think that this automatically leads to exclude that a total ban can remain the unique solution in certain cases. As the Assembly Resolution 2507 (2023) stressed:

– Russian and Belarusian athletes can hardly demonstrate their neutrality and distance from these regimes, let alone make any declaration against the war, without putting themselves in a dangerous situation;

– the Russian and Belarusian regimes can use any victories of their athletes in their propaganda, thus creating a narrative of acceptance and normalisation that downplays the gravity of the Russian and Belarusian Governments' actions;

– the arguments for permitting the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes, on the grounds of neutrality, independence of the sports movement and non-discrimination, do not carry sufficient weigh in the face of the imperative to condemn and repudiate the atrocities being committed and to demonstrate the international community's complete and unwavering support for Ukraine as the onslaught continues. And this cannot be overlooked by those actors – such as IOC and the IFs – that proclaim their adherence to human rights.

39. The Olympic Charter stresses the centrality of athletes in the context of the Olympic Movement; it aims to protect them from external influences that undermine sport and from the dangers connected to sporting activities, and to enhance their political and representative role in sport governance (Rules 16 and 21).

40. However, when it comes to "neutrality", athletes are willing to exert their right to freedom of expression and are increasingly voicing political opinions; they are often supported by brands, which understand that silence is not equivalent to "neutrality" and take a stronger socio-political stance by withdrawing from sponsorship of major sporting events.[30]

41. Sport scholars have also used the concept of soft power to analyse the politicisation of sport in the past decades, and the role of the powerful individuals placed by governments in IFs, which is again clearly inconsistent with sport neutrality.[31]

42. In view of the undeniable economic weight of the sports sector today, of the colossal financial flows that major sporting events generate and of the too close links between sport and economic and political (including State) powers, it is likely that, rather than a tool for "soft power" at the service of peace and democratic principles, sport will increasingly become an instrument of economic pressure, thereby entering the field of traditional "hard power",[32] which is anything but "neutral".

43. Democratic institutions and sports governing bodies need to address important ethical questions on the separation of sport and politics, the competing interests and values that sport neutrality reveals, as well as the paradox of sport neutrality and the staging of major sporting events to facilitate "political objectives".[33]

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30. "Politics and sports have never been closer. For brands, silence isn't neutrality", *The Drum*, 19 January 2024.
31. "International Sport Federations as Forums to Initiate Soft Power Processes: The Case of Russia", *Asian Journal of Sport History & Culture*: Vol 2, No 1, 12 June 2023.
32. Julie Tribolo, "Sport et paix, un mariage de raison? Retour sur trente ans d'utilisation du sport au service de la paix par les Nations Unies", *L'Observateur des Nations Unies*, 2022, Le droit international face aux problématiques contemporaines du sport, vol. 52 (2022-1), pp. 35-58.
33. See also "Symposium on Sport and Neutrality", Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, 23 October 2023.

4. Reaffirming the role of the Olympic Movement as a tool for peace and democratic progress

44. As discussed at several hearings of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, sport can bring about unity and positive change in society, and the Olympic Movement has the immense potential to bring together people seeking to overcome differences and promote peace.

45. Speaking before the committee, Bernard Hilgers acknowledged that the potential peace achievements of the Olympic Movement and its institutions were limited.[34] However, the world can be brought together through sport (i.e. the Olympic Truce, the Refugee Olympic Team, the Unified team of South Korea and North Korea), regardless of differences, even in times of crisis. In his view, the message for peace in wartime could only be to transcend conflicts by hosting the Games, in a unified and politically neutral fashion.

4.1. The crucial and undervalued role of the Olympic Truce

46. Recognising sport as a common resource for societal cohesion and international diplomacy, the 2024 Porto Ministerial Conference urged stronger mechanisms to ensure sport remains a unifying force rather than a political battleground. Ministers responsible for sport reiterated that sporting events, particularly the Olympic Games, must actively contribute to peace efforts. The recognition of the Olympic Refugee Team at the 2024 Council of Europe North-South Prize underscores the role of sport as a tool for social inclusion and human rights advocacy.

47. Therefore, the Olympic Truce must evolve from a symbolic appeal into a binding obligation, ensuring that any country engaged in active conflict commits to a cessation of hostilities as a precondition for participation.

48. In this regard, it would be equally useful to revise and strengthen the institution of the Olympic Truce, so as to also address some of the accusations of double standards levelled by President Bach. Indeed, the concept of the Olympic Truce, rooted in the ancient Greek tradition of *Ekecheiria*, aims to ensure a period of peace and mutual respect among warring States during the Olympic Games.

49. Professor Di Marco explained to the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media that there is no legal framework but only a United Nations resolution, without any declaration by the “belligerent” countries participating in the Olympics, nor any reference or indication in the documents of the Olympic Games such as contracts, charters, etc. The exact nature of what is expected is unclear: a ceasefire, a humanitarian pause, an armistice, a window of silence, the cessation of hostilities? In this context, any decision to punish a country appears to be arbitrary. In his view, the Olympic Charter should be amended to clarify whether the Truce is a rule, a symbolic measure, or an appeal by the UN Secretary General, and thus define criteria and sanctions, including conditions and formats for exclusion.

50. I share his view that the scope and legal link between sport and humanitarian law should be strengthened to make countries accountable and sanctionable. This is certainly a responsibility incumbent on all States members of the international community; but this should also be a responsibility of sports authorities, and they have tools at their disposal such as financial sanctions, conditionalities to respect in order to host international sport events, limitations to the right to participate in competitions, bans on athletes or countries.

51. According to the IOC, making compliance with the Olympic Truce a condition for participation in the Olympic Games would not only go beyond the scope of sport, but also risk undermining the fundamental principles of the Olympic Movement. In their view, the Olympic Games exist to bring together the world’s athletes in fair and peaceful competition and decisions on war and peace remain the exclusive remit of governments. The UN Olympic Truce Resolution is addressed to States, not sports organisations or athletes, and the IOC has no mandate or enforcement mechanism in international conflicts. Making athletes’ participation dependent on government decisions would unfairly deprive athletes of their life’s work for actions beyond their control. This principle has been reaffirmed through the Individual Neutral Athlete status**,** which allows athletes with a Russian or Belarusian passports to participate in Paris 2024 under strict conditions of neutrality.

52. In the present times when global stability, international law, democratic values and human rights are dramatically threatened, I believe that the Olympic Truce should be established as a condition for participation, emphasising the promotion of peace, unity, and goodwill among nations. This would entail that any country engaged in active warfare or armed conflict should commit to a temporary cessation of hostilities

34. See all IOC initiatives for “Peace and development through sport”, Olympics.com.

for the duration of the Olympic Games and should, of course, be immediately held accountable for any violation of the Truce. This would symbolise a collective commitment to fostering a peaceful and co-operative global environment during the sporting event. By making the Olympic Truce a prerequisite for participation, nations would signal their dedication to the principles of international harmony, sportsmanship, and diplomacy. The exclusion of countries in active conflict from the Games would serve as a powerful incentive for leaders to prioritise peaceful resolutions and encourage dialogue as an alternative to armed confrontation.

4.2. Preventing a martial attitude to sport and protecting sport's essence and values

53. Sport must remain a bridge, especially during difficult times. However, it is not acceptable that it is used for propaganda, manipulation and exploitation purposes, and the Olympic Movement must not allow this. Nationalism and politics may interact unfavourably within sport. At the same time, politics has proven important for the IOC to propagate its message and acquire power. This power is political and comes with responsibility.[35]

54. Sport must be protected by all of society, including sports organisations, athletes, policy makers and non-governmental organisations.

55. As an expression of society, sport must respond to the value system agreed at international level, not only *de jure* through international charters, statutes and conventions, but also *de facto*, in the concrete implementation of sport policies, especially in the face of massive human rights violations.

56. Global sports bodies face these political challenges, as do all supranational institutions, and have common goals but often different ways to achieve them. They possess tremendous leverage to advance human rights and world peace through concrete actions.

57. Claiming sport neutrality in absolute terms to keep out of politics can result in denying sport's ethical core and the fundamental values of Olympism. We must highlight the relevance of human rights in the Olympic Movement and its responsibility in the context of the Olympic peace mission, especially in times of war.

58. Professor Melica underlined that the martial idea of sport – aimed at publicly demonstrating, together with sport primacy, also economic-political primacy by presenting autocratic forms of State as an alternative to liberal democracies – is contrary to the values of Olympism. This should be taken into consideration when assigning the Games.

59. It must also be recognised that those athletes who denounce discrimination and human rights violations are in fact implementing the Olympic Charter by fulfilling the requirement of Rule 27 which calls on the members of the Olympic Movement to disseminate the principles of Olympism and monitor their implementation. This transforms the Charter into a tool for peace and democracy to such an extent that sport cannot remain totally neutral.[36]

60. Therefore, not only the assertion of sport neutrality cannot stand without an effective response to the problem of the instrumentalisation of sport and major sport events, but sport neutrality is also challenged by the axiology of sport: when core values are flouted, leading sports bodies must react and take a position, whatever the direct or indirect political implications of their response might be.

61. In other terms, discussing sport neutrality cannot be dissociated from the need to discuss concrete means to protect sport values, promote peace and respect for human rights and "universal fundamental ethical principles", as also enshrined in the Olympic Charter.

62. This discussion, of course, is not confined to the Russian war of aggression, as the core values mentioned above must be protected anytime and everywhere with coherence and without complacency, by adopting measures and sanctions which are proportionate to the magnitude of the threats. In this respect, as Ms Helleland clearly stated in her report: "should the IOC consider that other conflicts – including internal conflicts – call for stronger sanctions against specific countries from the Olympic Movement, (…) it can count

35. "The Dichotomy of Political Power and Political Position at the Olympic Games", Sport Matters, 16 February 2021.

36. The IOC Athletes' Commission received the full support of the Executive Board for a set of recommendations in regard to Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter and Athlete Expression at the Olympic Games. These refer explicitly to the principles and values to be emphasised such as peace, harmony, respect for others, human dignity, equality and non-discrimination, unity, etc.

on the support of the Council of Europe and its Assembly, as long as the goals pursued by the IOC are democracy, human rights, the respect of international law and peace, and that its sanctions uphold these goals." (§ 49).

4.3. Political neutrality and athletes' freedom of speech aimed at championing the values of the Olympic Charter

63. Athletes are central to the Olympic project; their right to practice sport is a part of the right to participate in cultural life, which includes the right to "develop and express their humanity, their world view and the meanings they give to their existence and their development through, inter alia, values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, institutions and ways of life".[37]

64. The IOC supports freedom of expression while ensuring respect for athletes during competitions and ceremonies. Based on input from more than 3 500 athletes, it has updated the Guidelines on Athlete Expression and amended Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter. Rule 40 now explicitly states that all competitors, team officials and Games personnel have the right to express themselves in line with Olympic values and IOC guidelines.

65. Rule 50.2 of the Olympic Charter indirectly recalls the principle of political neutrality by stating that "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas".[38] Historically, this article has been interpreted narrowly, preventing athletes from contesting any political act, even those affecting human rights.

66. Recently, however, the IOC Executive Board, urged by the Athletes' Commission, endorsed reforms to Rule 50[39] aimed at protecting athletes' freedom of speech, for future and varying applications depending on location, timing, and content. Athletes are encouraged to promote solidarity, unity and inclusion at opening and closing ceremonies. Through the Olympic Truce mural, they can show their support for the ideals of the Truce and extend its reach through digital engagement. The only restriction applies to podium and official ceremonies which are preserved from any protests, demonstrations, or actions perceived as such.

67. The recommendations by the Athletes' Commission align well with the legal framework of the Olympic Charter (particularly Fundamental Principles 1, 2 and 4) and position athletes as key players in ensuring adherence to these principles and those enshrined in the UN 2022 Resolution "Sport as an enabler of sustainable development".[40] These recommendations can also serve as a guide to further amend Rule 50.

68. Johannes Herber, German athletes' representative, observed that is "perilous to limit any possible changes to Rule 50 in advance to the scope of the Olympic Charter".[41] He added that "the Charter does not include a commitment to fundamental human rights". While the IOC's principle of non-discrimination is vital, he argued, "it does not cover many other rights worthy of protection". He therefore proposed adding an eighth principle of Olympism to the Charter, committing the IOC "to respect all internationally recognised human rights".[42]

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37. Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-cultural-rights/international-standards.

38. On this rule and its evolution, see European Commission, "Study on athletes' rights in and around big sport events", May 2024, pp. 137-139, 2024.

39. "IOC Athletes' Commission's recommendations on Rule 50 and Athlete Expression at the Olympic Games fully endorsed by the IOC Executive Board", Olympics.com, 21 April 2021. The recommendations are the result of an extensive qualitative and quantitative consultation process implemented by the IOC Athletes' Commission, which started in June 2020 and involved over 3 500 athletes, representing 185 different NOCs across all 41 Olympic sports, and ensuring a fully gender-balanced representation. The consultation was supported by the athletes' commissions of the continental associations and the World Olympians Association.

40. UN, Resolution "Sport as an enabler of sustainable development", A/RES/77/27, 7 December 2022. This resolution recalls UN Resolution "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", A/RES/70/1, 25 September 2015, p. 37. The 2022 resolution reaffirms that sport is an important enabler of sustainable development and recognises the growing contribution of sport to the realisation of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to physical and mental health, education and social inclusion objective.

41. "Statement on the Revision of Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter", Ahtleten Deutschland e.V, 11 June 2020.

42. The Charter's Fundamental Principle 1 defines the concept of "Olympism" stating that it "seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for internationally recognised human rights and universal fundamental ethical principles within the remit of the Olympic Movement". Therefore, the respect of human rights is not an IOC's commitment *stricto sensu*.

69. I also believe the IOC and all sports governing bodies should actively engage in the protection of human rights, especially when violations directly impact or take place in the world of sport, which they often do. This engagement should include human rights policies and programmes combating all forms of discrimination, advancing gender equality, protecting clean and safe sport and upholding sport integrity.

70. It is time to seriously consider the athletes as powerful and independent allies in the implementation of the Olympic Charter and its values, without any pressure to take political stances, by specifying that political neutrality does not prevent them from supporting peace or condemning human rights violations.

5. Final recommendations and proposals to amend the Olympic Charter to fully support the goal of Olympism

71. In its input to the work of the committee, the IOC thanked the Assembly for its interest in the Olympic Movement and asked for its support in upholding the unifying mission of the Olympic Games and the autonomy and neutrality of sport. If the Olympic Games are to remain a platform for peace and understanding – bringing athletes together even in times of conflict, rather than becoming a tool for division – these fundamental principles must be upheld. The IOC is committed to ensuring that the event continues to embody universality and solidarity in a safe, accessible and inclusive environment.

72. The IOC also expressed its commitment to upholding integrity in sport by continuously improving its governance, policies and processes. As part of the Olympic Agenda 2020+5, it has reviewed governance standards in order to meet the highest financial and institutional requirements. Recognising the role of public authorities, the IOC welcomes initiatives such as the Parliamentary Alliance for Good Governance and Integrity in Sport. To maximise impact, it has encouraged co-operation with the International Partnership Against Corruption in Sport, an initiative co-funded by the IOC and the Council of Europe that brings together stakeholders to fight corruption and promote ethical practices. By leveraging existing frameworks, the Parliamentary Alliance can further strengthen integrity in sport and the IOC remains committed to supporting these efforts.

73. My intention with this report was to highlight the international sport organisations' central role in connecting the global sports arena and the international system. In particular, international sports organisations such as the IOC and FIFA (International Federation of Association Football), despite their claim to neutrality, are important political actors that frequently use their influence in the international arena. This puts into question both the very meaning and the practicality of sport being politically neutral,[43] as is claimed by the IOC.

74. International sport has been an integral part of the international system from the very beginning. The norm of neutrality serves primarily as a pragmatic "compass" that can guide the behaviour and decision-making of sport officials. On a more foundational level, it serves to preserve the monopoly of international sport organisations such as the IOC in the face of possible conflicts or fragmentation. At a time of full-scale wars, flagrant violations of international law and widespread human rights abuses, some commentators have argued, with some reason, that the functional norm of neutrality should be superseded by other, more fundamental principles to which the Olympic movement claims to be committed: first and foremost, "promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity".[44]

75. The principles of autonomy and independence of sport should serve peace and implement democratic principles, not vilify them. It is apparent that for some States, sporting victories serve as a demonstration of power and prestige, supporting a governance model and transforming sport into a critical *instrumentum regni* (instrument of rule), which goes against the international legal order and negates the very idea of sport neutrality. Such trends are especially prevalent in States with weak or failing democracies.

76. This martial attitude to sport aimed at publicly demonstrating, together with sporting primacy, also economic-political primacy by presenting autocratic forms of State as an alternative to liberal democracies is incompatible with the values of the Olympic Charter. Democratic governments, international organisations, athletes and sports governing bodies cannot remain silent in the name of sport autonomy.

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43. "A Game of Politics? International Sport Organisations and the Role of Sport in International Politics", *Tandfonline.com,* 3 May 2023.
44. Leo Goretti, "Olympic Neutrality and Norm Emergence in International Sport: A Long-Term Perspective", *The International Journal of Sport and Society*, September 2024.

77. Although the Olympic Charter makes reference to the respect for internationally recognised human rights, their prevalence is not sufficiently clear and their implementation lacks strength and consistency. The effective promotion of human rights requires a firm rejection by sports organisations of a martial vision of sport.

78. Thus, sports governing bodies cannot rely solely on NOCs, which are sometimes not autonomous but government-controlled, and increased scrutiny is essential to strengthen the IOC's ability to gather information. This can be achieved:

– by amending Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter to specify that political neutrality does not prevent athletes from supporting peace or condemning human rights violations in the name of the Olympic values;

– by introducing a Charter provision declaring that a martial attitude to sport is incompatible with Olympism;

– by introducing a robust monitoring system, such as establishing an independent commission supported by independent experts. Any member of the NOCs, the IFs and the national federations, as well as any athlete affiliated or registered with these entities, should have the right to file complaints, reports or any other alert identifying potential violations of human rights within the Olympic Movement or the emergence of the martial vision of sport promoted by national sporting or political institutions.

79. The challenge of the newly elected IOC President[45] should be to combat a distorted vision of sport, which can only happen if the IOC Executive Board is determined to actively gather all the necessary information.

80. The Assembly should take a clear stance in this respect. Whenever a government infringes these principles and rules, the sanction should be the admission of their athletes as independents and neutral. Such a sanction, as seen in the 2024 Paris Games, can bring reputational damage to the government in question and is often more impactful than a full ban.

81. Athletes take great pride in representing their country, their people, and their flag. For States with a martial approach to sport, an athlete's victory without a flag and anthem is half a victory, or not a victory at all, as is underlined by the lack of broadcasting on national television. It is of course more difficult to associate an independent athlete's victory with the strength and prestige of their country of origin. Ultimately, the Olympic Games would deter imperialistic ideology, without infringing upon the athlete's rights, unless exceptional circumstances call for exceptional and stricter measures, such as a total ban.

82. Furthermore, the Olympic Charter does not foresee the necessary impartiality and transparency of the justice system that is called on to assess the Charter's implementation. To specifically safeguard autonomy and independence, an independent and impartial judicial body should ensure the proper constitutional control to apply and interpret the fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter, which have legal value just like any other constitution.[46] This body would also need to assess the "constitutionality" of the reforms adopted by international sports bodies, as such decisions should not be left to those in charge of applying the rules. In other terms, I believe that the IOC and the Olympic Movement should strengthen the rule of law within their remit.[47]

83. Last but not least, when assigning the Olympic Games, commitments to human rights standards must be verified and the assignment must be revoked if no progress is made. Paragraph 20 of Resolution 2420 (2022) "Football governance: business and values" called on FIFA and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) to review the conditions that countries bidding to host major football events must meet in terms of safeguarding human rights and to provide for, if they do not already, a number of requirements, which are detailed in paragraph 20 of the resolution. Of course, this call should be extended to all of the Olympic Movement. Strong human rights conditionalities for all major sport events are being discussed in Mr Kim Valentin's (Denmark, ALDE) report entitled "Protecting human rights in and through sport: obligations and shared responsibilities".[48] This should be fostered by all IFs, led by the example of the IOC.

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45. "IOC President Election 2025", Olympics.com.
46. The Olympic Charter is the compilation of fundamental principles, rules, and bylaws that establish and regulate the IOC, its subordinate IFs, and the NOCs, as well as each Olympic Games and the individual athletes competing in the Games. Collectively, everything governed by the Charter is known as the Olympic Movement.
47. At the 2024 Ministerial Conference in Porto, Ministers also underscored the urgent need for stronger governance in sport, advocating for transparency, accountability, and independent oversight mechanisms. These principles call for an independent monitoring system within the IOC, ensuring that governance structures remain autonomous and uphold the core values of Olympism.
48. Doc 16196.

84. The hearing organised by the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media in December 2024 on human rights conditionalities for major sporting events, which was attended by representatives of Amnesty International, the Council of Europe's Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport and World Athletics, highlighted that international human rights law must take precedence over political neutrality. The IOC Charter is not superior to international conventions and treaties, and the concept of autonomy in sport should not shield organisations from accountability. This was reiterated on 12 March 2025 during an exchange of views with FIFA representatives.

85. The IOC should adequately verify that the vision of the political and sports institutions of the host country is compatible with Olympism and its values and that the national sports institutions, particularly the NOCs, operate in conditions of autonomy, as established by the Olympic Charter.

86. As a vision for the future, in which sport can truly represent the Olympic values of excellence, respect and friendship and the ultimate goal of Olympism "to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society", I would like to put forward another proposal that was discussed during the meeting of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media on 27 May 2024.

87. Sport could become an arena free of political symbolism in the form of national flags and anthems. Athletes could march in the Olympic opening ceremony according to their sports, rather than by country. This would also circumvent the challenges faced by athletes with multiple citizenships or refugees regarding representation. Both scenarios would be truer to sport's originally intended goal than the current balancing act that gives the false appearance of an impossible neutrality of sport.[49]

49. I would like to thank Mr Jörg Krieger for his contribution to these reflections and to point to his latest book, the provocative *National symbols at the Olympic Games – an Olympics without flags?,* Routledge, 2025.