

# Contestation on the Playing Ground: The Russia-Ukraine War between Beijing 2022 and Paris 2024

LEO GORETTI

## Abstract

This chapter argues that international sport functions as a secondary institution of the international system whose norms are contingent on systemic politics. Focusing on the case of the Russia–Ukraine war from Beijing 2022 to Paris 2024, it traces how the International Olympic Committee (IOC) deployed two norms (that is, political neutrality and the Olympic Truce) to preserve organizational cohesion, and how the most directly involved state actors (Ukraine and Russia) responded. The chapter shows that neutrality operated primarily as a damage-limitation device, rather than as a value-oriented principle, and that it was intensely contested. Contestation unfolded in two modes: “thin” contestation (by Ukraine) sought to reprioritize values within the Olympic framework, elevating condemnation of aggression over neutrality, whereas “thick” contestation (by Russia and aligned actors) challenged the framework’s legitimacy and incubated alternative events, raising fragmentation risks. Overall, the chapter highlights that a truly “universal” sport arena is necessarily dependent on a functioning global international system at large.

## Abstract (Italiano)

Questo capitolo sostiene che lo sport internazionale funzioni come un’istituzione secondaria del sistema internazionale, le cui norme sono contingenti alla politica sistemica. Concentrandosi sul caso della guerra Russia–Ucraina, dal ciclo che va da Pechino 2022 a Parigi 2024, esso ricostruisce come il Comitato Olimpico Internazionale (CIO) abbia impiegato due norme – la neutralità politica e la Tregua Olimpica – per preservare la coesione organizzativa, e come gli attori statali più direttamente coinvolti (Ucraina e Russia) abbiano risposto. Il capitolo mostra che la neutralità ha operato principalmente come uno strumento di limitazione dei danni più che come un principio orientato ai valori, e che è stata oggetto di intensa contestazione. La contestazione si è articolata in due modalità: la contestazione “thin” (da parte dell’Ucraina) ha cercato di riorientare la gerarchia dei valori all’interno del quadro olimpico, elevando la condanna

dell'aggressione al di sopra della neutralità; la contestazione “thick” (da parte della Russia e degli attori a essa allineati) ha invece messo in discussione la legittimità stessa del quadro e promosso eventi alternativi, aumentando i rischi di frammentazione. Complessivamente, il capitolo mette in evidenza che una arena sportiva realmente “universale” dipende necessariamente dal corretto funzionamento del più ampio sistema internazionale.

Keywords: *Olympic neutrality, norm contestation, secondary institutions, International Olympic Committee, Russia-Ukraine war, sports diplomacy*

## Introduction

The fundamental idea behind the Olympic Games is to unite the entire world in peaceful competition. [...] At the Olympic Games, the athletes of the territories of all 206 National Olympic Committees and the IOC Refugee Olympic Team embody this peace mission. Based on our political neutrality, we welcome all National Olympic Committees of the world who respect our constitution, the Olympic Charter, without any discrimination for any reason (IOC, 2024a).

It was thus that, in May 2024, the then-President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Thomas Bach summed up the mission of the Olympic movement. With the Paris Olympics drawing near and no truce in sight for the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars, Bach seemed bent on stressing the peace-facilitating and bridge-building role of Olympism. To ensure as wide a participation as possible, the IOC reiterated its commitment to “political neutrality” and the rejection of “any discrimination” – provided, however, that its “constitution”, the Olympic Charter, was respected.

As Bach's speech highlights, today's international sport is governed by organisations (such as the IOC) that are grounded in a complex constellation of values (such as peace) and norms (such as neutrality) that are explicitly codified and formalised (as in the Olympic Charter). As I discuss in another paper (Goretti, 2025), the norms underlying international sport have been developed – and modified – over the more-than-a-century-long history of the Olympic movement, not only due to internal organisational needs, but also as a response to exogenous changes in the international system. They

have both provided a source of legitimacy for the governing role of the IOC over international sport – as is the case for the supposed universal peace mission of Olympism – as well as a useful compass to navigate international tensions and conflicts that may threaten the unity of international sport, causing fragmentation. This latter function has been played especially by the norm of political neutrality, which has been codified in the Olympic Charter only in 2018, admittedly as a response to “increased political and geopolitical and nationalistic pressures” encroaching on the IOC (IOC Media, 2018, 1:09:06-1:10:01).

Within a very few years, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in a blatant violation of international law, posed very uneasy questions to the organisations in charge of international sport: first and foremost, whether to introduce sanctions – and how – against the Russian state, its officials and athletes (Goretti, 2022). Through a process-tracing approach, this chapter will interrogate what role the norm of neutrality has played in this debate: how it has been referred to and applied by the IOC<sup>1</sup>, whether and how it has been contested by state and non-state actors, and – more generally – to what extent it has proved effective in preventing fragmentation in international sport. More broadly, the discussion will focus on the degree of dependency or autonomy of sport in the international system, shedding light on its nature as a “secondary institution” of the international society.

## 1. International Sport as a (Contested) Institution

While sports history and sociology literatures have thrived since the 1970s, International Relations (IR) scholarship took a longer time to develop a substantial interest in sport. In the last two decades, however, a remarkable amount of research has investigated the nexus between international sport and international affairs: first and foremost, by focusing on the role of sport as a “soft power” tool employed by democratic and authoritarian states alike, and of sport

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<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging the relevance of FIFA as the other major organisation governing international sport, due to the scope of the analysis, the paper focuses on the IOC only, although occasional references to international football and its organisations are included as well.

diplomacy an enabler or facilitator of interstate relations. A more recent stream of literature has highlighted how international sport can also become a site for what Stuart Murray (2018) defined as “anti-diplomacy” and different types of contestation: from boycotts and other forms of protest, to public initiatives challenging the existing order, to media contestation (Diodato and Strina, 2023).

This chapter proposes a complementary, institutionalist approach. The underlying assumption is that sport should be regarded as an institution: that is, building on Keohane (1988: 383) and Hodgson (2006: 2), a “system of established principles, norms and rules, identifiable in space and time, that structure repeated human interaction”. More specifically, “international” sport should be considered a “secondary” institution of the international system: that is, as per Kilian Spandler’s definition (2015: 613), an institution that (i) refers to a “discrete section[n] of international reality and appl[ies] to a clearly defined set of actors” and (ii) whose existence is dependent and conditional on that of other, more fundamental and general institutions, such as state sovereignty and multilateralism. Indeed, “international” sport would simply not exist in the complete absence of common rules and institutions shared by and conducive to peaceful coexistence among sovereign states. To illustrate, one can simply refer to the cancellation of the most important international competitions – the Olympics and the men’s football World Cup – during the two world wars, for all the (wishful) efforts of sport bureaucrats to keep the flame alive.

A related consideration is that the international system and its dynamics have an impact on the institutions of international sport. This is certainly the case as far as the process of norm emergence is concerned, as well exemplified by the recent codification of the norm of “political neutrality” in reaction to a fraught international environment. Another poignant example is the development of the notion of “Olympic Truce” in the early 1990s. The outbreak of the war in the ex-Yugoslavia led the United Nations Security Council to vote Resolution 757 on 30 May 1992, which invited all states to “Take the necessary steps to prevent the participation in sporting events on their territory of persons or groups representing the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)” (UN Security Council, 1992). As a result, the Yugoslavian team was banned from

the European football championship 1992, while the IOC managed to include Yugoslav athletes in the Barcelona Summer Games as “independent Olympic participants”. Building on that crisis, IOC President Samaranch soon put forward the proposal for introducing a UN-sanctioned period of truce in correspondence with the future Olympic Games, which was eventually approved by the UN General Assembly with resolution 48/11 on 25 October 1993 and reiterated for all the subsequent Olympics (UN General Assembly, 1993; Waters, 2023). The IOC’s website explicitly states that the introduction of this norm was made “taking into account the new political reality in which sport and the Olympic Games exist” (IOC, 2025a), highlighting the nexus between the norms of international sport and the international system. Notably, as will be discussed in the following, both political neutrality and the Olympic truce have been widely referred to in the debate over Russian participation in international sport that ensued the outbreak of the war against Ukraine.

At the same time, however, contestation in the international system may also lead to “contestation” of the existing institutional framework (in terms of values, norms and organisations) of international sport. This contestation can originate from different subjects – state actors, non-governmental organisations, the media, athletes (Goretti, 2023), among others – and can take different forms. In this paper, we will distinguish between two different modes of contestation, building on both Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) and Wiener (2014). A first mode of contestation is “thin contestation”: what is contested is not the existing institutional framework per se, but rather the way in which its values and norms are applied (their scope) and hierarchised (what values/norms should take precedence if a conflict between them arises). This kind of contestation is therefore aimed at redefining priorities within the existing framework. Examples of thin contestation in international sport may be the (successful) campaign of African countries for the exclusion of apartheid South Africa in the 1960s (Booth, 2003) or the protest of the German men’s football team against the prohibition of the rainbow “OneLove” armband at the Qatar 2022 World Cup (BBC, 2022a). In both cases, emphasis was put on the need to give priority to fundamental values (anti-racism, anti-discrimination and LGBTIQ+ rights) within the established structure of international sport.

A second mode of contestation is “thick contestation”: that is, the contestation of existing frameworks as such. Unlike thin contestation, this type of contestation can potentially lead to the emergence of alternative, competing institutional frameworks for international sport, implying the risk of its fragmentation. An example of “thick contestation” in international sport was the establishment of alternative international sporting movements in the early 20th century, such as the two separate international Workers’ Sport movements that contested the *bourgeoise* character of Olympic sport (based on amateurism) in accordance with the approach of the Socialist and Communist Internationals (Gounot, 2015). Another salient example was the (short-lived) organisation of the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFo) in Jakarta in 1963, in the context of decolonisation and as a result of the People’s Republic of China self-exclusion from the Olympic movement: Indonesia’s President Sukarno explicitly proposed “to mix sports with politics, and [...] establish the Games of the New Emerging Forces, the GANEFo [...] against the Old Established Order” (Connolly, 2012: 1313). Arguably, in line with our general assumption about the relation between international sport and the international system, thick contestation in international sport is more likely to emerge at times of heightened tension in the international environment. The case of the Russia-Ukraine war, which will be discussed in the following, provides an apt testing ground for this hypothesis.

## 2. The Olympic Norms *vis-à-vis* the War against Ukraine

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 immediately had a profound impact on international sport. The Beijing Winter Olympics had drawn to a close just four days before the invasion; heightened international tensions had reverberated through the Games, with the Biden administration embarking on a diplomatic boycott in response to the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s human rights violations, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping meeting on the sidelines of the Games to announce the alleged beginning of a new era of international relations based on “just multipolarity” and Ukrainian athletes staging pro-peace demonstrations during

the Games to call international attention onto the Russian threats of aggression. Within a few hours of the invasion, a debate started about the participation of Russian athletes in upcoming high-level sporting events such as the Beijing Paralympics (to be held 4-13 March) and the qualifiers for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, with Russia set to face Poland in a play-off match scheduled on 24 March. Athletes, sport officials and government representatives from not only Ukraine, but also several Western (especially Nordic) countries, called for an outright ban of Russia and Belarus from international sport (Goretti, 2022; Kobierecka and Kobierecki, 2023).

For once, the organisations governing international sport, such as the International Olympic and Paralympic Committees and FIFA, were quick in reacting to the new reality. On the same day of the invasion, the IOC issued a statement where it “strongly condemn[ed] the breach of the Olympic Truce by the Russian government” (IOC, 2022a). Indeed, since the Truce started seven days before the beginning of the Olympic Games and would last until seven days after the end of the Paralympic Games, the Russian war could be framed as a violation of a fundamental norm of “both” international sport and the international system, as the Truce had been adopted by consensus within the United Nations General Assembly (2021). This became the normative argument based on which all subsequent “sanctions” adopted by the IOC against the Russian government and its officials were grounded. The day after the invasion, on 25 February, another communique was issued whereby all international sports federations were urged to cancel all the events to be held in Russia and Belarus (BBC, 2022b)<sup>2</sup>, as well as “to take the breach of the Olympic Truce by the Russian and Belarussian governments into account and give the safety and security of the athletes absolute priority” (IOC, 2022b). Finally, on 28 February, a new recommendation was published whereby two different sets of measures were taken: first, the Olympic Order was withdrawn from high-ranking Russian government officials – including President Putin – due to “the extremely

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<sup>2</sup> Belarus was mentioned by the IOC due to its government’s “support” for Russia’s war; notably, however, FIFA and UEFA allowed Belarussian teams (both at the national and club levels) to compete, albeit playing their home matches at neutral venues without spectators.

grave violation of the Olympic Truce [...] by the Russian government”; second, the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international competitions was discouraged “in order to protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants” (IOC, 2022c). In the subsequent weeks, most (but not all) international sports federations adopted such recommendations (Heerdts and Battaglia, 2022).

Notably, while in the public debate all these measures were lumped together as “sporting sanctions” against Russia, the IOC carefully distinguished between them and their underlying rationale. The measures targeting the Russian government and state (including a total ban on using its symbols, flags, anthems or colours at any international event) were indeed explicitly presented as “sanctions” against the Russian war of aggression, and were motivated by referring to the normative system of international sport (a result of “blatant violation of the Olympic Truce and [...] the Olympic Charter” on part of the Russian government). The exclusion of athletes was instead framed as a temporary “protective measure” that the IOC was forced to take due to widespread “anti-Russian and anti-Belarusian feelings” and, most importantly, “public and political pressure” by governments on national Olympic committees, with the latter being reportedly asked not to compete against athletes from certain countries (Russia and Belarus). This “exceptional” decision was admittedly taken by the IOC “with a very heavy heart” as a result of exogenous (governmental) pressures, supposedly to prevent an even greater fragmentation of international sport into opposing political blocs and thus its “full politicisation” (IOC, 2022d). The exclusion of Russian athletes was thus portrayed as the “lesser evil”, necessary to “protect” the Olympic movement amidst a major crisis originating in the wider international system, testifying to the “secondary” – and dependent – nature of international sport and its norms.

Not surprisingly, as the months went by, the IOC was increasingly at pains to find a pathway to lift the protective measures threatening its supposed neutrality and restore its self-claimed “universalism”. To this end, a key moment was the letter addressed to Thomas Bach by the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in September

2022. While recognising the legitimacy of the sanctions introduced against the Russian state, the Rapporteurs raised “serious concerns” that the recommendation to ban Russian athletes may instead be a form of discrimination based on nationality (Xanthaki and Achiume, 2022; cf. Xanthaki, 2023). This opinion was constantly mentioned by IOC representatives in the process leading up to the revision of the recommendations on Russian athletes. Between March and December 2023, a set of criteria was outlined under which participation of individual Russian and Belarusian athletes under neutral flag could be reinstated, also looking towards the Paris 2024 Olympics. Strict eligibility conditions were defined: among them, a full ban on all those who actively supported the war or who were contracted to military or national security agencies. Notably, once again, the IOC motivated this decision by referring not only to its own normative framework (such as the “firm rejection of any political interference in the autonomous authority of sports organisations to decide on participation in their competitions”), but also to the opinion of an external actor in the wider international system: the UN, its resolutions and its Rapporteurs, on whose authority “the IOC has to rely” (IOC, 2023a; IOC, 2023b).

Overall, the IOC claimed – in its usual self-aggrandizing way – to have navigated the “complex political situation” created by Russia’s war against Ukraine following a “values-based course of action” inspired by the Olympic Charter. Values such as “peace, unity, solidarity and non-discrimination” would have provided a “compass” to address a seemingly “intractable” situation in the right way (IOC, 2023c). Yet, the IOC’s approach and decision were repeatedly contested, for different reasons, from both the Ukrainian and Russian camps, which sheds further light on the degree of effectiveness of the normative framework of international sport in addressing the impact of major international crises.

### 3. Ukraine: “There is not such a thing as neutrality”

As mentioned, Ukrainian sport took a firm stance against the Russian threats of war already during the Beijing 2022 Games. Following the invasion, on 27 February 2022, an open letter signed by Ukrainian

athletes was sent to the Presidents of the International Olympic and Paralympic Committee calling for a ban of Russian athletes from international sport, referring to the breach of the Olympic Charter and the grave danger that the invasion was posing to Ukrainian athletes' lives (Global Athlete, 2022). In the following months, Ukrainian officials and sportspeople campaigned against the presence of Russian competitors in some of the sports – especially tennis – where they had not been excluded. In their argumentation, they often referred to the death toll suffered by Ukrainian athletes due to the war as well as to the systematic politicisation of sport under Putin's regime. As tennis player Marta Kostyuk put it, "sport has always been politics and always will be" (Kane, 2022; cf. Burke, 2022).

Once it became clear that the IOC was looking for a pathway to reintegrate Russian athletes, President Zelensky himself repeatedly made a case against it. Russia deserves "complete isolation" in sport, the President argued in December 2022, pointing out that "184 Ukrainian athletes have died as a result of Russia's actions, and Russia itself uses sports for propaganda purposes" (Shefferd, 2022). Faced with the perspective of Russian participation at Paris 2024, Zelensky went on to underline that "there is no such thing as neutrality when a war like this is going on", that "that any neutral flag of Russian athletes is stained with blood" and that "Olympic principles and war are fundamentally opposed to each other" (President of Ukraine, 2023). In other words, the Ukrainian government contested the IOC's decision by establishing a hierarchy of values and norms within the Olympic framework: in the context of a major conflict, rejection and condemnation of a war of aggression should supersede political neutrality; sanctions should be extended to individual athletes too as their participation would be "a symbol of violence and impunity" (Lasjaunias, 2023).

Although minoritarian, similar arguments against Russian participation were shared also by some (Western) sports officials. Especially notable was the stance taken by Sebastian Coe – the President of World Athletics – who refused to lift the ban on Russian athletes in his federation despite the IOC's updated recommendations in 2023. Coe explained that this was a matter of "integrity" and of not being "on the wrong side of history": faced with the

dramatic consequences of the war on Ukrainian sport and people, “I can’t be neutral” (Rowbotton, 2023).

Coe’s position however was not shared by the majority of federations that instead started reintegrating Russian athletes as individual neutrals through 2023. Not surprisingly, the Ukrainian reaction was very harsh. For several months, the government considered the possibility of an outright boycott of the Paris Olympics (France24, 2023); in parallel, on 30 March 2023, a policy was issued by the Ministry of Sport that required athletes officially representing Ukraine not to participate in events where “neutral” Russian and Belarusian opponents were present (Melkozerova, 2023a). These initiatives, that would overall amount to a form of “thick” contestation of IOC norms and decisions, were eventually dropped, as it became progressively clear that a boycott would not be joined by the majority of Western allies and that not attending events was overall harmful to Ukrainian athletes and not beneficial to Ukraine’s cause (Melkozerova, 2023b; Lloyd, 2023).

Instead, participation in international events, and especially the Olympics, could provide a platform to recall attention onto Ukraine’s war of resistance. As the official communique of the Ministry of Sport officialising Ukraine’s participation in the Paris 2024 Games clarified

this time for Ukraine, the Olympics is primarily a big screen to the world. We need to remind the world that Ukraine exists, is fighting and is capable of winning. The very fact that the Ukrainian flag is flying in Paris is a great manifestation of willpower (UNN, 2024).

Even though President Zelensky did not attend the event, 140 athletes qualified for the Games, and the Ukraine House in Paris was described as “a gritty celebration of Ukrainian national identity” (VOA, 2024). In the same vein, when Olha Kharlan – who had been disqualified from the 2023 Fencing World Championship for refusing to shake hands with her defeated Russian opponent Anna Smirnova – won the first medal for the country in the Games, she underlined that her medal was above all “a message to all the world that Ukraine will never give up” (Ames, 2024). In parallel, the Ukrainian government and civil society organisations carefully

screened the profiles of potential Russian participants, preparing databases and dossiers that contributed to keeping the attention high on the issue (Hoy, 2024; Sabbagh 2024; Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine, 2025). Specific guidelines were provided by the Ukrainian Olympic Committee inviting their athletes to avoid any direct contacts – either in person or via social media – with Russian and Belarusian attendees (Australian Associated Press, 2024).

Overall, Ukraine's contestation of the IOC policy toward Russia in 2022-2024 was of the "thin" type: that is, trying to revise priorities within the existing normative framework, placing a greater focus on issues such as the rejection of war and the humanitarian situation in the country, including for sportspeople, rather than on neutrality. Even though the possibility of a boycott of the Paris Olympics was repeatedly raised and a non-participation policy was initially introduced for events featuring Russian participants, the final deliberation was to keep acting within the existing system, leveraging it to keep the attention high on the situation in the country. This did not mean endorsing the IOC's rhetoric altogether, however: when French President Macron suggested the possibility of enacting the Olympic Truce on the Russia-Ukraine front during the Games, Zelensky was adamant that this was a non-starter for Ukraine, as it would just go to the benefit of Russia (Mathiesen, 2024). Once again, the hard reality of international politics superseded the idealistic normative framework of the IOC.

#### 4. Russia: the Paris Games as "a tool of gross, racist and ethnic discrimination"

Russia's reaction to the IOC's "sanctions" and "protective measures" was, as one may expect, of radical and aggressive contestation from the very beginning. The full membership of Russia in international sport had already been questioned for years: following the state-sponsored doping scandal in the aftermath of the Sochi 2014 Olympics, Russia's presence at all successive Games had been (mildly) tainted one way or another (Wallace and Giambalvo, 2022). President Putin, who since the inception of his Presidency had widely resorted to sport as a propaganda tool, repeatedly took issue

with the international anti-doping authorities, whose accusations he described as part of their supposedly anti-Russian politics (Goretti and Mariconti, 2023).

After the February 2022 IOC recommendations were issued and Russia was excluded from the Beijing 2022 Paralympics, the Kremlin reacted quickly by organising an alternative Winter Paralympics in the city of Khanty-Mansiysk. In opening the Games, President Putin – who in the meanwhile had been stripped of his honorary titles by the IOC and the judo and taekwondo federations – emphasised the importance of the “fundamental values of sport, free of politics and discrimination”. In Putin’s view, however, the true “spirit” of international sport had been desecrated as a result of a long-term drift that had begun with the 2016 Summer Games and had led to “double standards” and the “politically biased dictatorship of the anti-doping bureaucracy”, ushering in a “loss of authority and independence” for the organisations governing international sport. In his view, the recent exclusion of Russian athletes from the Beijing Paralympics represented a “violation of the Olympic Charter”, which mandates that “the Games are a competition between athletes, not between states” (President of Russia, 2022). In his argumentation, Putin was explicitly appealing to the principles of Olympism – although “peace” was notably not mentioned – while concurrently organising an alternative international event outside of the official framework of international sport. Participants reportedly included athletes from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (Berkeley, 2022).

This approach based on highlighting the supposed gap between Olympic values and the IOC’s unfair treatment of Russia and its athletes, paralleled by plans for organising alternative international competitions, continued through the Paris Games. The decision to re-allow entry of Russian athletes only as individuals under neutral flag was described by then-Russian Sport Minister Oleg Matytsin as “unlawful” and “openly discriminatory” (Barker, 2023a), and by heads of national federations as a “betrayal of the motherland” (Barker, 2023b). Although the channels of dialogue with the IOC and International Federations were not completely broken and the options for Russian participation were reportedly carefully weighed by the Kremlin (Daffunchio Picazo, 2024), the rhetoric became harsher as the months went by.

Another landmark speech was indeed delivered by Putin in October 2023, a few days after the IOC's decision to suspend the Russian Olympic Committee due to its annexation of the regional sports organisations in the occupied regions of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia (IOC, 2023d). The Russian President first reiterated his commitment to “the Olympic principles of solidarity, equality and an honest sports competition” – once again, “peace” was absent –, then attacked the supposed political misuse of the Olympic Games by the IOC leaders as “a tool of gross and, in fact, racist and ethnic discrimination”. The IOC's exclusionary policy laid bare that the Olympic Charter “no longer has a universal character”, as “some sports officials have simply arrogated to themselves the right to determine who is covered by this Olympic Charter and who is not”. Against this discriminatory backdrop, Russia was ready to “cooperate with everyone who shares the traditional values and principles of sports”, with an explicit reference to Xi Jinping's China, the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Accordingly, Putin announced that Russia was set to organise a series of international events in 2024, such as the phygital “Games of the Future” in Kazan in February, the BRICS Games also in Kazan in June, and the World Friendship Games (a sort of counter-Olympics) in Moscow and Yekaterinburg in September. Overall, Putin's plans “for a multifold increase in the number of sports competitions” were clearly hinting at a possible split in international sport (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Botswana, 2023).

The conflict with the IOC further escalated in March 2024. The Olympic Committee established the panel that would review the eligibility status of each Russian and Belarusian athlete and clarified that the latter would not be allowed participation as a delegation in the opening ceremony in Paris (IOC, 2024b); furthermore, the Olympic Committee issued a declaration where it described the World Friendship Games planned by Russia as “purely politically motivated sports events”, thus in violation of the Olympic Charter as well as of UN resolutions, and urged all its stakeholders and governments to reject the initiative (IOC, 2024c). The Russian government's reaction was spearheaded by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, according to whom “These decisions demonstrate how far the IOC has moved away from its stated principles and

slipped into racism and neo-Nazism”. IOC’s request not to support the World Friendship Games was instead described as a form of “intimidation” (France24, 2024a).

Amidst these tensions, the following weeks saw the progressive hollowing out of Russian participation in the Paris Games. Once it became clear that the eligibility status of several high-profile Russian athletes was not granted, especially in combat sports, many admissible athletes declined the invitation to Paris, prompted by the respective Russian sports federations. In the end, out of 36 eligible athletes who were invited to attend, only 15 eventually did so, with the Kremlin reportedly offering a monetary compensation to those who refused to participate (Meshcheriakova, 2024; Judo Inside, 2024). As a further testimony of the de-facto boycott of the event by Russian authorities, for the first time since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Russian tv did not broadcast the Paris Games (AP News, 2024a). In parallel, according to several sources, Russia-affiliated actors ramped up a disinformation campaign against the Paris Olympics, focused on discrediting the organisers and spreading concerns about possible outbreaks of violence during the Games (AP News, 2024b; Microsoft Threat Intelligence, 2024). While Vladimir Putin did not speak out during the Games personally, government spokespeople and lawmakers invited the IOC to “abandon its destructive anti-Russian course” (TASS 2024a) and claimed that

in case the International Olympic Committee is unable to learn anything and does not return the Olympic Games to an unbiased, non-politicized policy, does not revive the ideas of the Olympic Movement [...] this organization should simply cease to exist (TASS, 2024b).

A few months after the end of the event, Putin eventually commented that the 2024 Games had been “removed from the essence of a true sports festival [...] that embodies the values of equality, friendship, mutual respect for cultures and traditions, honest competition” – once again highlighting the supposed gap between sporting values and the exclusionary decisions adopted by the organisers (TASS, 2024c).

In all, Russia’s response to the IOC decisions can be considered a form of thick contestation. To be sure, the Russian government

constantly referred to the normative framework of the Olympic movement, especially the principles of non-politicisation and non-discrimination (but not that of peace), to contest the IOC's decisions. At the same time, however, Russian authorities took a number of initiatives that were aimed at establishing a counter-regime (or a "sub-regime") in international sport, such as the announced organisation of international events like the World Friendship Games. Claiming to be the true defender of the original spirit of Olympism, President Putin called into question the legitimacy of its governing organisation, posing a threat of fragmentation to international sport. This was evidently the result of a wider fracture in the international system, as also highlighted by the Kremlin's focus on non-Western countries and fora (first and foremost, the BRICS and the SCO) in its attempt to create an alternative calendar of international sports events. Russia's "thick" contestation of the existing framework of international sport overall offers another – more confrontational and radical – example of the impossibility to keep international sport and its norms shielded from international tensions and ruptures at times of major crisis and war.

## Conclusions

In his closing speech at the Paris 2024 Olympics, Thomas Bach celebrated the success of the event "despite all the tensions in our world". During the Games, the Olympic Truce had dramatically failed to materialise, amidst Russian continued attacks on Ukraine, Kyiv's surprise counteroffensive in the Kursk region and the killing of Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran. Bach was therefore forced to admit that "the Olympic Games cannot create peace", although he vented the hope that "the Olympic Games can create a culture of peace that inspires the world" (IOC, 2024d).

In fact, the Paris Games highlighted once more the influence of world politics and contestation dynamics on international sport, especially as far as the Russia-Ukraine war is concerned. Not surprisingly, contestation from the Ukrainian side was overall limited. Although athletes, officials and authorities kept complaining about the (minimal) presence of Russian participants (Hodunova, 2024), they mostly

leveraged the Olympic arena to call attention to their country's dire situation and resistance. To be sure, the IOC did not loosen its neutrality policy and firmly deterred any demonstration of national pride beyond the strict rules provided by the Olympic Charter: for example, the International Canoe Federation prevented Ukrainian canoeist Anastasiia Rybachok from using a boat donned with the phrase "I am Ukrainian" (Rubryka, 2024). Nonetheless, Ukraine's medals (twelve overall) were explicitly framed by athletes and government officials as the symbol of the fact that "Ukrainians know how to be strong and how to win" (@ZelenskyUa 2024). In all, Ukraine's approach was that of redefining priorities in the context of international sport to spotlight the country's plight, resilience and needs.

Contestation from Russia, instead, became even harsher. This was especially the case of the virulent attacks against the Games and the IOC by the President of the International Boxing Association (IBA) Umar Kremlev. The IBA had been suspended by the IOC since 2019 due to its financial and reputational ills. In 2020, Kremlev took over the Presidency on the promise of bringing in a substantial sponsorship deal with Gazprom; this, however, was not enough to rehabilitate the Association, which was eventually expelled from the Olympic movement in 2023. An associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin and a member of the organising committee of the World Friendship Games, Kremlev described the Paris Games as "outright sodomy and the destruction of traditional values throughout the world" (@umarkremlev 2024). Most importantly, he played a major role in fuelling the controversy surrounding Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, which became part of the wider disinformation campaign promoted by Russian actors against the Games (Goretti, 2024). In sum, during Paris 2024, the narrative promoted by Russia focused on the supposed moral decadence of the IOC and Western organisers, paralleled by the idea of organising alternative events reviving the 'traditional' values of international sport.

On the whole, the way in which the IOC navigated the Russia-Ukraine conflict between the Beijing 2022 and the Paris 2024 Games highlights, on one hand, its continued attempt to appeal to political neutrality as a normative point of reference to protect international sport as much as possible from the turbulence of international politics; but also, on the other hand, the limited impact of such an approach

in the context of a major international conflict, which de facto forced the Committee to take some kind of position (albeit cautiously and somehow half-heartedly). The IOC's decisions, in turn, resulted in contestation (of the thin and thick type) from both warring sides and soured its relations with one of the world's sports superpowers.

Sure, should the international scenario change (for instance, in the case of some kind of deal, truce or ceasefire in Ukraine), international sport may be one of the first areas where a rapprochement may materialize – indeed, some signals in this direction emerged in the months following the Paris Games, such as a change at the helm of the Russian Olympic Committee, with the new President Mikhail Degtyaryov stating that “it is time for us to stop the aggressive rhetoric against our international colleagues”, eyeing a Russian return to the Olympic movement, and the indefinite shelving of the plans for the World Friendship Games (France24, 2024b). As then-IOC-President-hopeful Jose Antonio Samaranch Jr admitted, however, such a “rapprochement” would be conditional on “the reasons for the [Russian] suspension [being] removed” – reasons that, once again, directly refer to wider questions pertaining to international politics and law (the unlawful inclusion of sports organisations in the occupied regions under Russian authority) (Muñana, 2024).

To conclude, the case of the Russia-Ukraine war and its repercussions on international sport between Beijing 2022 and Paris 2024 demonstrates that the existence of a truly “universal” sport arena is necessarily dependent on a functioning global international system (what we may call an “international society”); when the latter is fraught by wars or major tensions, sport's calls for political neutrality are nothing but a strategy of damage limitation vis-à-vis contestation inevitably spilling over into the playing ground.

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**Leo Goretti** is Head of the “Italian foreign policy” programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, as well as editor of *The International Spectator* and of IAI's *Commentaries, Briefs, Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *Research Studies* series. He holds a PhD in History from the University of Reading (UK). He has published extensively on Italian history and politics in peer-reviewed journals (including *Modern Italy*, *Passato e presente*, *The International Journal of Sport and Society*), for international think tanks (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, DGAP) and in IAI's editorial series. He regularly provides expert analysis to international and Italian media such as the BBC, *Foreign Policy*, *Politico Europe*, Deutsche Welle, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *la Repubblica*.

Email: [l.goretti@iai.it](mailto:l.goretti@iai.it)