

Blood-doping scandal: a concern for the Kremlin

Jan Strzelecki

On 18 July, a report was published by an independent commission acting on behalf of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) revealing the state-organised system of doping in the Russian sports programme. WADA has advocated that the International Olympic Committee exclude Russia from the Olympic Games. On 24 July, however, the IOC decided not to exclude the entire Russian Olympic team from participation in the Games. Decisions concerning the admission of individual Russian athletes to the Games have been passed on to the governing bodies of the specific disciplines, which will take them on the basis of international anti-doping tests. Previously, the International Association of Athletics Federations had already taken the decision to exclude Russian athletes. Not as many athletes involved in doping scandals will attend the Olympics as in the past, nor as many of the Russian officials who had been involved in organising and covering up the doping.

Commentary

- The WADA report revealed the systemic nature and significant scale of doping in Russia: it stated that in the years 2012-2015, 643 cases of doping in Russian athletes had been hushed up. The allegations mainly concern infringements made during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, which were particularly prestigious for the Russian government. The report reveals the involvement of the Federal Security Service, senior officials and anti-doping laboratories in the organisation and cover-up of doping in sport. The cooperation of these institutions indicates that the decisions in this matter were most likely taken at the highest level of the Russian authorities.
- The disclosure of the doping scandal has placed the Russian authorities in a problematic situation, as the Kremlin draws legitimacy from the narrative of Russia's strength on the international stage, and the country's image as a superpower is built up through sports, among other means. Russian media and political reactions to the publication of the WADA report have so far been negative, but still relatively restrained. President Putin announced that the officials named in the WADA report will be suspended from their duties for the duration of the investigation (these include the deputy sports minister Yuri Nagornykh), and has called for the convening of a special commission to clarify the allegations. At the same time, the Kremlin and media close to it have discredited the charges contained in the WADA report, arguing that they are based on unreliable testimony by the former head of an anti-doping laboratory in Moscow, Grigory Rodchenkov, and have painted them as an attempt by the United States to put pressure

on Russia and its sports organisations.

- The statements by Kremlin representatives after the IOC's decisions showed that Moscow received the Committee's decision not to suspend the whole Russian national team from the Olympics with considerable relief. However, in the light of the subsequent decisions by a series of sporting federations to exclude individual Russian athletes from the Games, Russia's short-term success might prove to be a Pyrrhic victory, and this year's Olympics will probably not perform the legitimising function which the authorities had assumed they would. On the other hand, the Kremlin's loss of face has to some extent damped down the media campaign in Russia, in which the prevalence of doping in other countries had been emphasised, and which alleged that the sports federations were anti-Russian in nature (according to opinion polls carried out in June, 76% of Russians believe that the decision to prevent Russian athletes from participating in the Olympic Games had political motives).