

Russian doping scandal: should other countries pull out of the Olympics?

Written by Anne Schwenkenbecher, Lecturer in Philosophy, Murdoch University

National anti-doping groups have [condemned the International Olympic Committee's \(IOC\) response](#) to revelations of widespread state-sponsored doping by Russian athletes, echoing incredulity elsewhere that the committee didn't take a tougher stance against Russia.

The decision was in response to a recent [report by the World Anti-Doping Agency \(WADA\)](#), which produced evidence of a state-run doping scheme in Russia during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and other major sports events.

[WADA recommended](#) the IOC ban all Russian athletes from competing in Rio 2016.

Instead, the [IOC announced](#) a week later that, rather than imposing a blanket ban, it would accept entries of Russian athletes only if they had been cleared by their respective international sporting federation.

It also decreed that no Russian athlete with a prior doping conviction could enter the 2016 Olympics, regardless of whether the sentence had been served. Since then, [117 of the initially nominated 387 Russian athletes](#) have been banned, with some decisions [still outstanding](#).

Collective responsibility and blanket bans

The [IOC argued](#) that banning all Russian athletes would be a kind of collective punishment that's unjust to individuals not implicated in doping.

There's little justification for a blanket ban; all Russian Olympic athletes did not collectively commit a wrong. Nor could they collectively have prevented the same. Rather, a subgroup participated in an illegitimate practice that Russian officials, rather than the athletes themselves, devised and implemented.

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Not all Russian athletes benefited from the scheme and it's safe to assume that [not all athletes](#) knew about it. On what account of responsibility could or should members of the equestrian team, who have been cleared by their international federation, be held responsible – and punished – for the doings or failings of weightlifters, for instance?

State-run doping schemes are top-down affairs. Athletes can play along and benefit – or presumably they can choose not to. Those who participated made themselves accomplices in a wrongful collective endeavour. And they, of course, should be banned from competing in the 2016 Olympics, or even beyond.

Seeing there are explicit rules and guidelines on doping in sport, violating them must disqualify the perpetrators. But for assessing the moral wrongness of their choice to play along with and benefit from such a scheme, it's important to know the cost involved to the individual athlete who did not play along.

And on what grounds could one demand that *all* Russian athletes be disqualified? If the character of the Russian scheme suggested that doping was prevalent in every Olympic discipline, it might be impossible to establish who participated and who did not. But nothing suggests this was the case. And if the [decision](#) [s of the individual international sporting federations](#) are anything to go by, it looks like not all athletes from implicated disciplines were part of the system.

For all we know, there may well have been athletes who took the – possibly risky – decision not to participate in the scheme. Disqualifying them would punish the wrong people.

We also hold people to be morally implicated or tainted if they could have collectively prevented something bad from happening but didn't. Much like bystanders of a bar fight gone out of control, who could have jointly overwhelmed the aggressor and saved his victim but didn't.

Holding all Russian athletes responsible for this kind of collective omission would require a large enough proportion of athletes to have substantial knowledge of the doping scheme. It would also require them to be in a position to collaborate in forming some kind of realistic opposition to the scheme. Whether the political climate of their country allows this possibility is key – and

debatable.

Is withdrawal the answer?

Given the IOC has chosen not to ban all Russian athletes, should other countries pull out of the 2016 Olympics in protest? The first question this notion raises is about the purpose of such protest. If the aim is to punish Russia for having adopted an institutionalised doping program, we must be very careful not to [punish the wrong agents](#).

First, there is the problem of “overspill” – unintended harm to others. Withdrawal from the Rio Olympics as a sign of protest would punish the withdrawing countries’ own athletes, who have been working very hard for the chance to compete in the games.

Another well-known moral challenge for punishing institutional agents, such as states, is the problem of misdirected harm: the burden imposed is borne by individual agents, rather than the institutional agent. In this case, a major burden would be borne by individual Russian athletes, including clean ones.

How, then, can we punish an institutional agent? [One way of avoiding misdirected harm](#) toward individuals is by enforcing institutional reforms and restructuring.

Obviously, this cannot be done by forcing Russia to adopt reforms. But it can be done at the level of the IOC’s doping control regime by establishing independent international testing agencies.

Such intervention would bear similarities to the legal punishment of individual agents in that it would limit the respective agent’s autonomy (the country’s own anti-doping regime, in this instance). And it avoids punishing individual athletes in the way blanket bans and boycotts do, while at the same time removing opportunities to rig the system.

Anne Schwenkenbecher does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant

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