
Sven Daniel Wolfe: Updating the Olympic Charter is a dangerous game

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Last week, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that they are proposing to amend the Olympic Charter.

Their press release frames this as the IOC "following up on its human rights commitments," and explains that the Executive Board has already submitted the proposed changes to the 141st IOC Session, meeting next month in Mumbai.

Helpfully, the IOC provided an online document that lists the proposed amendments in track changes mode. This institutional transparency is admirable and other organisations should take a page from the IOC in this regard.

At the same time, the proposed amendments themselves leave much to be desired. Far from "a major step in our commitment to the respect for human rights in the Olympic Movement," as Thomas Bach proclaimed, the amendments provide legal and political cover for the IOC during the controversy surrounding the possible participation of athletes from Russia and Belarus. These amendments are a direct effect of the Russian war against Ukraine.

There are only a few changes to the Charter but the implications are significant. In Fundamental Principle 1, the old text of "respect for universal fundamental ethical principles" has been augmented to read "respect for *internationally recognised human rights and universal fundamental ethical principles within the remit of the Olympic Movement,*" [emphasis added].

There are some problems with this amendment, notably with the phrase "within the remit of the Olympic Movement." The word *remit* connotes that international sport has limits, and it is beyond the powers of the Olympic organisers to - for instance - sanction a Government that is aspiring to totalitarianism and that has launched a genocidal war against a neighbouring nation, buttressed by waves of terror and repression at home.



The IOC Executive Board has submitted proposed changes to the Olympic Charter to next month's IOC Session for final approval ©Getty Images

The reason for this amendment is to enshrine in the Olympic Charter a barrier between the notion of "sports" and the notion of "politics." This is a tired argument and it is long overdue for burial.

Sport is, always has been, and always will be political. Given the political power inherent to global sport, it is disheartening - at the very least - to see the IOC change its Charter rather than meeting the unique challenges of this moment.

If they really believed in the value of social responsibility, it would be hard to imagine a more crucial time to make a clear moral stand against the war and the Government that is prosecuting it.

The changes to Rule 40 add a new paragraph regarding the right of freedom of expression among competitors, officials, and other personnel. At first this seems to be good news - is the IOC finally permitting individual athletes to have a voice on their global platform?

Alas, the end of the new paragraph imposes immediate limits on this supposed freedom: "... shall enjoy freedom of expression *in keeping with the Olympic values and the fundamental principles of Olympism, and in accordance with the guidelines determined by the IOC Executive Board,*" [emphasis added].



Fundamental Principles of Olympism (proposal from the IOC EB to the IOC Session)

OC Rule	Current text of Olympic Charter	Proposed amendment (in blue)
Fundamental Principles of Olympism 1	Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.	Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism 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.
Fundamental Principles of Olympism 4	The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.	The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have access to the practice the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind in respect of internationally recognised human rights within the remit of the Olympic Movement. and in The Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.

A screenshot explaining one of the proposed changes to the Olympic Charter ©ITG

This is like parents telling a teenager that they can do anything they like this weekend, so long as they have no parties and come home by six. The Executive Board has created the appearance of free speech, but under this Potemkin surface, the substance of the matter remains the same.

They have ceded no power and there will be no free speech - and certainly no political speech - from athletes or others at the Games.

These legal subtleties may seem small, but they can have outsized effects on the ways in which the IOC operates in the context of geopolitical conflict.

The IOC is not a homogenous organisation and there are doubtless many in their ranks who oppose these changes. It is a sad reflection on the limits of Olympic governance that passage of these amendments is all but certain.

While it is unlikely that these developments can be stopped, it is nevertheless important to bring attention to them. At the very least it renders visible the goals and affiliations of certain power brokers within the IOC leadership. And as regular people continue to die in Ukraine, it is especially important to call that out.

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