



By: TA | AP Insight

# Olympics and free speech – new testing of boundaries



Ukrainian skeleton racer Vladyslav Heraskevych pushed at the limits of the International Olympic Committee's rules on freedom of expression, and the global sports body pushed back. That created an emotional and historic moment of Winter Games lore.

Heraskevych insisted on wearing a helmet in competition with the images of Ukrainian athletes and coaches killed during Russia's nearly 4-year-old full-scale invasion of their country.

By refusing to back down, he was **disqualified** from his Olympic event Thursday.

He defied a last-minute plea by IOC President Kirsty Coventry, who was in tears after their early morning meeting at the sliding center in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Although disqualified from the competition, Heraskevych was not expelled from the **Olympics**, unlike previous athletes who staged prominent protests.

## Heraskevych and the Olympic rules

Heraskevych had freely worn his preferred helmet on training runs, and the IOC told him he could bring it to media areas on race days.

For the actual race, however, he refused to wear an approved helmet that complied with IOC rules designed to keep the field of competition clean of political messages.

Heraskevych also refused proposed IOC compromises of wearing a black armband or displaying the helmet once he was off the course.

Political neutrality is a foundational principle of the **Olympic Charter**, a 108-page document of 61 articles that effectively serves as the constitution of the IOC and the Olympic Games.

Rule 50 states: "No kind of demonstration or

political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas."

In addition, Rule 40 states that athletes comply with "conditions of participation established by the IOC," including where and how free expression can be displayed.

**It is not at all about the message. It is simply about the sanctity of the field of play - Mark Adams**

"It is not at all about the message," IOC spokesman Mark Adams said at a daily news conference dominated by the helmet issue. "It is simply about the sanctity of the field of play."

Sports law expert Antoine Duval told The Associated Press it was "a huge move" for the IOC to cite Rule 40 on free expression and not the one on political propaganda.

"That is demanding that athletes are like absolute robots," said Duval of the Asser Institute in the Netherlands, suggesting future Olympians could face scrutiny over their tattoos.

## Heraskevych's Olympic history

Heraskevych, 27, is at his third Winter Games and the second under the shadow of Russia's war in Ukraine, which began Feb. 24, 2022 — four days after the end of the Beijing Winter Games.

On Feb. 11 of that year, Heraskevych completed his races in China and held a **small sign** for the TV cameras in the blue and yellow colors of his national flag with the slogan, "No War in Ukraine."

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The IOC took no action against him, deciding this was “a general call for peace” and not an explicitly political statement.

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## Neutral politics, protecting athletes

The IOC says its athlete expression rules were drafted after consulting with officially recognized athlete groups, including some from countries where they face political interference.

“We cannot have athletes having pressure put on them by their political masters to make messaging during the competition,” Adams said.

The risks of the competition being overshadowed by political statements could be even greater at the larger Summer Games like those in 2028 in Los Angeles, when the IOC wants 206 national Olympic teams, plus a refugee team, to take part.

“Think of the Middle East, think of Africa, think of South America, if everyone is allowed to express themselves in that way beyond a black armband,” Adams said “You can see where that would lead to a chaotic situation.”

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A regular concern at Summer Games in recent years has been the issue of some athletes seeming to be pulled from competition to avoid facing an **opponent from Israel**.

The last **major review** of protest guidelines was overseen by Coventry while she was an IOC athlete representative ahead of the Tokyo Olympics held in 2021.

Stricter rules were in place but **eased just weeks before** those Games, in which women's soccer teams took a knee before the first whistle to support racial justice.

## Other incidents by athletes

Heraskevych's case has been compared to U.S. figure skater Maxim Naumov, who made an emotional tribute in Milan this week.

After his skate, he displayed a photo of himself as a child with his parents, who were killed in January 2025 when American Airlines Flight 5342 struck a military helicopter on approach to Ronald Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C., and fell into the icy Potomac River.

Adams said Naumov's display was “a spontaneous show of emotion” after his event.



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At the Paris Olympics 18 months ago, Afghan refugee **Manizha Talash** competed in the breaking competition wearing a cape with the slogan, "Free Afghan Women." She was disqualified by the World DanceSport Federation.

Also in Paris, the opening ceremony saw a memorial gesture in which Algerian athletes tossed red roses from their boat into the Seine at the spot where in 1961 dozens of protesters died in a police crackdown.

Perhaps the most famous demonstration came at the 1968 Summer Games in Mexico City when U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood atop the medal podium after the 200 meters race.

With their feet bare and their heads bowed, the two Black Americans each raised a gloved fist to protest racial injustice. They were expelled from the Games but allowed to keep their medals.

## Russia's impending return

The helmet issue has put Ukraine back in the Olympic news at what could be the last games before Russia returns to the IOC fold.

Russian athletes and teams have faced varying restrictions on competing – without their national identity of flag, anthem and colors – at each Olympics in the past decade because of doping scandals and the war.

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The legal dispute is under review, and the IOC advised sports governing bodies in December to look at restoring Russian youth teams to international competitions with their full identity.

Ukrainian Sports Minister Matvii Bidnyi has urged the IOC not to make concessions before the war ends.

The **IOC suspended the Russian Olympic Committee** in October 2023 for breaking the Olympic Charter by incorporating sports councils in four regions of Ukraine that Moscow illegally annexed.