

Don't give Putin his Berlin moment

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FILE - In this Aug. 2, 1936 file photo Adolf Hitler and Colonel General Hermann Goering are on the grand stand in the stadium watching the events on the field at the Olympics in Berlin. Europe's largest Jewish sporting event is coming to Germany for the first time, bringing more than 2,000 Jewish athletes together from around the world to compete at a site constructed by the Nazis for the 1936 Olympics. (AP Photo, file)

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In 1936, the international community ignored the obvious anti-Semitism, racism and aggression of Hitler's regime and allowed the Olympic Games to go ahead in Berlin. The Nazis were delivered a propaganda coup.

At the opening ceremony, Hitler's propaganda minister Goebbels said the Games were "a victory for the German cause." The *Manchester Guardian* described the Games as a "Nazi Party rally disguised as a sporting event." Three short years later, Hitler and his then-Soviet ally Stalin invaded Poland, launching the most murderous conflict in human history.

In 2014, for the first time in Europe since the end of World War II, a state tried to change international borders by force. Putin's Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Shortly after, Russia invaded eastern Ukraine, launching a war of aggression that is in its fifth year and has cost Ukraine thousands of lives.

In June, the 2018 FIFA World Cup is scheduled to begin in Russia. As the UK's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson recently said, "the comparison with 1936 is certainly right. It is an emetic prospect to think of Putin glorying in this sporting event."

The parallels between the '36 Games and the 2018 World Cup are striking. Once again, a prestigious international sporting event is being held in a country ruled by a murderous dictator bent on destroying the rules by which the international community lives. Once again, an international sporting event will be used by a dictator to consolidate his grip on his country's people. Once again, a dictator will use sport to try to gain international legitimacy.

The free world should not let that happen. FIFA needs to remove the World Cup from Russia and hold it in a country that does not violate international law, wage wars of aggression, commit war crimes, or systematically dope its athletes.

The Putin regime's actions demonstrate its utter contempt for the values and principles upon which the democratic world is based – in addition to invading Ukraine, Putin is supporting the vicious Assad regime in its war against the Syrian people. Russia has shot down a civilian airliner, MH-17, murdering 298 innocent civilians.

The Russian regime systematically targets dissent at home, persecutes the LGBTQ community and seeks to undermine elections abroad. Just a few weeks ago, Russia perpetrated the first chemical attack on the soil of a NATO country, using a nerve agent against a former Russian spy in Salisbury, maliciously endangering the lives of hundreds of people.

Getting FIFA to remove the World Cup from Russia will of course be a tall order. The football federation is hopelessly corrupt, as has been demonstrated by the dozens of indictments of high-ranking FIFA officials by the US Justice Department, Swiss authorities and others, on charges of bribery, kickbacks and influence peddling. Many of these charges stem from the process awarding Russia the Cup in the first place. The former FIFA chief who brought the Games to Russia, Sepp Blatter, is banned from FIFA activities for overseeing this pyramid of graft.

The international community has significant leverage over FIFA. States that respect democratic values should make clear their intention to boycott the Games in Russia. If states who qualified – such as England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland, South Korea, Japan, Spain – and many others – announce that their teams will not participate in a World Cup held in Russia, FIFA will have no choice but to move the event, or risk having it turn into a farce.

The free world must send a message to Putin that the threat to international peace posed by Russia will be met with a strong response. Removing the World Cup from Russia would be an important signal that Russia must change its behavior. We should not let history repeat itself. Don't give Putin his Berlin moment.

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