



An Ethical Assessment of Individual-Targeting Sports Sanctions on Russian Athletes

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Abstract

In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many international sports organisations banned not just athletes from representing Russia, but also their participation in the competitions. I examine the ethical justifiability of such individual-targeting sports sanctions through just war theory and consequentialism. I argue that just war theory judges such individual-targeting sports sanctions as ethically wrong for targeting athletes who are not agents of strategic threat, and for failing to minimise harm when feasible. I argue that consequentialism also judges such sanctions as wrong if quantitative empirical findings about economic sanctions were to be generalised to individual-targeting sports sanctions. When not referring to such evidence, consequentialism is either neutral about such sanctions, or unable to produce useful judgements due to empirical uncertainties. Based on the above considerations, we have stronger reasons to believe that such sanctions are wrong than otherwise.

Keywords Just war theory · Discrimination principle · Deontology · Ethics of sanctions

Introduction

In February 2022, Russia commenced the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In response, various states meted out punitive measures in the form of economic sanctions on Russia. Curiously, various international sports organisations also joined in the mix. Some (e.g., the International Ice Hockey Federation, Federation Internationale de l'Automobile) banned athletes from competing under the Russian flag in

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continuation of existing doping sanctions, and stopped hosting competitions in Russia. Nevertheless, other organisations (e.g., Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA),¹ International Skating Union (ISU),² World Aquatics,³ Wimbledon Championships)⁴ took a stronger stance and banned Russian athletes altogether. There has been a lack of academic discussion about the ethical justifiability of the latter type of sanctions. Such sanctions deserve greater scrutiny because they set the precedence for international sports organisations to ban participants based on nationality in response to interstate aggression.

In this paper, I undertake the task of assessing the ethical justifiability of sports sanctions in the form of banning athletes from international competitions based on their nationality in response to interstate aggressions. I do so with two ethical theories. One of them is just war theory. It is an influential framework for the moral evaluation of wars and their related decisions. It has informed intellectual discussions in military ethics and the application of international law in military conflicts (Parry 2015; Lazar 2017). Moreover, it is also frequently invoked when evaluating economic sanctions, including those not made in response to or as an alternative to wars. This is because, as will be explained in the following section, this theory imposes ethical restrictions on decisions that inflict harm on people indiscriminately, and ethicists believe that similar restrictions should also apply to economic sanctions.⁵ Economic sanctions and the sports sanctions of concern in this paper bear enough similarity such that just war theory is also suitable for evaluating the latter, since both involve inflicting intentional harms for a (presumably) noble political aim. Thus, this theory is used for ethical analysis in this paper.

The other theory I adopt is consequentialism. It is another highly influential theory, often used for moral evaluation of wartime business and political decisions, including those in the Russian–Ukraine war context (Lazar 2020; Ó Laoghaire 2024; Pattison 2015). An advantage of consequentialism is that it is suitable for solving moral conflicts (Bergström 1996). This makes it especially useful for evaluating the sports sanctions of concern in this paper since the latter may involve a conflict

¹ 'FIFA/UEFA Suspend Russian Clubs and National Teams from All Competitions'. <https://www.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/qatar2022/media-releases/fifa-uefa-suspend-russian-clubs-and-national-teams-from-all-competitions>, 1 March 2022.

² 'ISU Statement on the Ukrainian Crisis Participation in International Competitions of Skaters and Officials from Russia and Belarus'. <https://www.isu.org/media-centre/press-releases/2022-4/27825-isu-statement-on-the-ukrainian-crisis-01-03-2022/file>, 1 March 2022.

³ 'FINA Bureau meets, makes further decisions on Russian and Belarusian athletes and event hosting'. <https://www.worldaquatics.com/news/2547346/press-release-fina-bureau-meets-makes-further-decisions-on-russian-and-belarusian-athletes-and-event-hosting#:~:text=Further%20to%20the%20FINA%20Bureau's,and%20officials%20from%20Russia%20and>, 23 March 2022.

⁴ 'Statement Regarding Russian and Belarusian Individuals at The Championships 2022'. https://www.wimbledon.com/en_GB/news/articles/2022-04-20/statement_regarding_russian_and_belarusian_individuals_at_the_championships_2022.html, 20 April 2022.

⁵ See (Early and Schulzke 2019; Amstutz 2013; Winkler 1999). Note that Ellis (2021) disputes the applicability of this theory to economic sanctions. Nevertheless, Ellis's argument revolves around the assumption that countries do not have the positive duty to trade with each other. It does not apply to this paper, since it is not intuitive to assume that the sanctioners (sports organisations) do not have the positive duty to admit qualified athletes.

between the imperative of not inflicting harms on athletes and the need to respond to the escalating war. Consequentialism and just war theory also offer complementary perspectives for this paper, since the latter treats intentional and unintentional harms differently, while the former does not. Though by no means exhaustive, these two theories should provide suitable frameworks for the moral judgements in this paper.

For clarity, this paper only focuses on individual-targeting sports sanctions made in response to the 2022 escalation of the Russian–Ukraine war. “Individual-targeting sports sanctions” refer to blanket bans of Russian athletes from participation in international sports competitions in this context. Those are distinguished from sanctions that target primarily the Russian state rather than individual athletes, such as banning athletes from competing under the Russian flag but allowing them to compete as neutral athletes.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Sect. "[Just war theory](#)", I evaluate the individual-targeting sanctions using just war theory. I argue that such sanctions are morally wrong under this theory because they violate the discrimination principle, regardless of the motive of the sanctions. In Sect. "[Consequentialist considerations](#)", I assess such sanctions through consequentialism. I argue that under certain epistemic assumptions, consequentialism may judge such sanctions as wrong. Without such assumptions, consequentialism is either neutral about such sanctions, or unable to produce useful judgements due to epistemic uncertainties. Based on the above two theories, I argue that we have stronger reasons to believe that such sanctions are wrong than otherwise. In Sect. "[Discussion and future studies](#)", I compare my analysis with studies that evaluate this issue from other angles, before concluding this paper.

Note that in this paper, I generally hold a positive evaluation of professional competitive sports. This evaluation is reasonable: besides the positive meaning attributed to athletes and athleticism in the lay consciousness, career in professional sports is also associated with lower mortality, suggesting possible health benefits to the athletes (Runacres et al. 2021). However, I acknowledge the ugly side of competitive sports, such as labour exploitation, abuses and the cultish influence of star athletes (Donnelly 2024; Asavei 2024; Salazar-Sutil 2008), which can be detrimental to athletes' psycho-physiological health and personal growth. Nevertheless, as will be explained in Sect. "[Just war theory](#)", my main arguments in the paper are not contingent on this evaluation, and sanctions can still be bad for athletes even if they suffer substantial harms in their sports careers.

Just war theory

As explained earlier, just war theory is often used for evaluating economic sanctions. It provides a set of ethical principles guiding wartime decisions, and academic work on this theory in the context of both wars and economic sanctions tends to pay more attention to the principle of not directing intentional harms at civilians

(“discrimination principle”) than other principles.⁶ Thus, I scope my analysis in this section by focusing on the discrimination principle.

Given that the discrimination principle focuses on intentional harms, it is important to first lay out what intentional harms are involved in individual-targeting sports sanctions. The intentional harms are borne by Russian athletes affected by the sanction, and can be understood from three aspects. First, the denied opportunity to compete in international competitions is a harm for them. This is because the experience of matching against international elites can build up their skills and confidence. The sanctions thus result in a lost opportunity for them to improve their competency for their future career. Second, the loss of publicity associated with such competitions means athletes attract fewer sponsors and advertisement contracts, resulting in a loss of income. Third, the denied opportunity to achieve good results and receive the corresponding publicity means that those athletes fail to enjoy the honour and fame they would otherwise have enjoyed.

In what follows, I first assess whether the individual-targeting sports sanctions comply with the discrimination principle assuming that the motive of the sanctions is increasing the chance of Russia aborting its invasion. I term this a “strategic motive” of such sanctions. Given that such sanctions may also be understood as aiming at long-term outcomes not tied to the current war, or not aiming at any practical outcomes, I also assess the sanctions based on these motives, which I term “non-strategic motives”.

Strategic motive

The discrimination principle forbids harms directed at civilians or non-combatants.⁷ It is sometimes used interchangeably with *non-combatant immunity*. This, of course, does not directly apply to sports sanctions since all those being sanctioned are, by right, non-combatants. To use the discrimination principle in this study, we need to understand the morally relevant factors that distinguish combatants from non-combatants and use those factors to identify legitimate and illegitimate targets of sports sanctions. Coady (2004) argues that a commonly assumed rationale for non-combatant immunity in just war theory is that non-combatants may be assumed innocent—that is, not (seriously) blameworthy for the conflict of concern. I term this immunity based on *innocence*. Frowe (2011), on the other hand, suggests that another reason why some personnel should not be targeted in war is that they are not agents of threats to combatants. I term this immunity based on *agency*. These considerations complicate the picture, because innocence, agency and non-combatant status do not always overlap. Child soldiers, for example, are combatants and agents of threat, though they may be innocent (Coady 2004). Translators not affiliated with but providing services to the military, on the other hand, are non-combatants, but

⁶ Other than studies that examine economic sanctions using just war theory cited earlier, studies examining wars in general also tend to focus on the discrimination principle (Frowe 2011; Coady 2004).

⁷ The literature sometimes does not distinguish between the two. For clarity, I only use the term “non-combatants”.

may not be innocent, and are plausibly agents of threat (Frowe 2011). Frowe pushes for granting immunity based on agency. Coady does not provide a clear verdict on this, but can be interpreted as in favour of granting immunity based on agency as well. Thus, I assume that the most relevant distinction to the discrimination principle when applied to sports sanctions is the agent vs. non-agent distinction.

Before assessing whether Russian athletes are agents of threat, one more question that requires an answer is: what strategic threat, if any, do they pose if they participate in international competitions? Given that the strategic motive of the sanction may be understood as increasing the chance of Putin's government aborting the invasion, the athletes' threat may then be seen as the motive's reversal: the publicity which they receive in international sports events, especially prestigious ones, gives the Putin regime the assurance of the lack of international pressure. This may then lower the chance of it aborting the invasion. More concretely, Russian athletes' achievements at the competitions, when publicised, may boost soldiers' morale, or provide material for propaganda inciting nationalist sentiments among the general population (Wiater 2023). Conversely, the intention of the sanctions may be seen as restricting the publicity Russian players receive in international sports to avoid emboldening the parties behind the war, such as the Putin regime, the army and the nationalists.

Given the above strategic threats that Russian athletes pose, should they be considered agents of such threats? I argue that only some, but not all, of them are. One important factor for determining agency, as Coady suggests, is whether the individuals are aware and expected to be aware of the harms that their actions bring. Based on this factor, Russian athletes can be deemed agents of such strategic threat if they (are expected to) understand the political implications of their participation in sports competitions. Those who fulfil this criterion are or should be aware that their achievements may be used by the state for political purposes, including propaganda-making. By competing in those international events, then, they willingly take the risk of providing material for promoting nationalist fervour, and if the risk eventuates as harms caused by nationalism, then they are agents of such harms.⁸ These athletes are, therefore, not immune to being targeted by intentional harms.

It is infeasible to assess for every single Russian athlete whether one is an agent of the above strategic threats. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to say that age provides a good proxy for this assessment. Age is associated with both the formal and informal education one receives, and the abstract thinking ability which is important for one's reflection on different perspectives and understanding of the consequences of their actions (Arain et al. 2013; Gotlieb et al. 2024). Even though a non-arbitrary age threshold for agency may be hard to determine in this case, we may use age thresholds for other issues of social-political significance as references. The voting age ranges from 16 to 21 globally (Huebner and Petrarca 2024), with most jurisdictions setting the limit at 18. Similarly, the age of majority, which coincides with the

⁸ Frowe illustrates this using the analogy that drivers do not aim to crash the car, but are still agents of harm should they cause car accidents by mistake, since by choosing to drive, they willingly take the risk of causing accidents.

age for entering legally binding contracts in many countries, also ranges from 16 to 21 globally, and most jurisdictions set it at 18 as well.⁹ These age limits are relevant for assessing the agency of athletes in this paper, for they reflect people's estimation of when humans can be assumed to be capable of understanding the social-political implications of their actions. I thus argue that when assessing athletes' agency through the proxy of age in the context of evaluating individual-targeting sports sanctions, the age threshold for agency should be set at 18 years old, or at a minimum, 16 years old.

Once we establish the age proxy for athletes' agency of strategic threat in this case, we can see that there are indeed athletes (counterfactually) at international sports competitions who should be deemed as non-agents. For instance, athletes in figure skating—a sport which Russia is traditionally strong at—usually reach their peak in their mid-teenage years, and the minimum age limit set by the International Skating Union was 15 years old until the end of the 2022–2023 season (Merrell 2022; Macur 2022). Other sports such as skateboarding, surfing and swimming have a lower minimum age, or no limit at all (Treacy 2024), and athletes younger than 18 or even 16 years old are common in such sports.¹⁰ Thus, even though it is not feasible to know the exact age of Russian athletes who *would have* joined sports competitions but were prevented from doing so by sanctions, it is still reasonable to assume that for some sports, a sizable proportion of such athletes are below 18 or even 16 years old. They are not expected to be aware of the political implications of their appearance in such competitions, and it is plausible that many of them are indeed not aware. They are, in turn, not agents of strategic threat and they should be granted immunity from the intentional harms of individual-targeting sanctions. Thus, for sports with a low or no minimum age limit, the failure to exempt Russian athletes below 18 (or 16) years old from individual-targeting sanctions violates the discrimination principle.¹¹

Moreover, the mere absence of immunity from intentional harms does not make one a legitimate target of such harms. Frowe argues that to legitimately use intentional harms for strategic advantage in war, the harms must be minimised. A good proportion of individual-targeting sports sanctions fail to meet this requirement, regardless of whether they target non-agents. As explained earlier, the crux of the strategic motive is to restrict the publicity received by Russian athletes. For sports competitions involving paired matches or individual performances, their organisers can feasibly use alternative forms of sanctions to restrict publicity while inflicting

⁹ According to the Wikipedia page “Age of majority”, the age of majority in Indonesia and Yemen is 15 years old, lower than all other jurisdictions listed in the page. However, upon verification, the age of majority reflected in legal documents in both countries is higher (Indonesia: <https://eudl.eu/pdf/10.4108/eai.18-11-2020.2311595>; Yemen: <https://moj.gov.ye/LawsMD/30>). I acknowledge that there may be inconsistencies in the age of majority for each jurisdiction. However, I assume in this paper that a reasonable lower boundary for majority age would be 16 instead of 15.

¹⁰ In the 2024 Paris Olympics, for example, 208 athletes were below 18 years old, 39 of which were below 16. Data source: <https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/piterfm/paris-2024-olympic-summer-games?resource=download>.

¹¹ Examples of organisations that violate the discrimination principle in this way include the International Skating Union, World Aquatics, the Wimbledon Championships and so on.

less harms on the Russian athletes. They may, for instance, provide venues for Russian athletes to play or perform while blocking media or audience access to their matches or performances, and remove such results from overall rankings.¹² The lack of publicity on their matches and performances thus avoids boosting soldiers' morale or contributing to propaganda. Meanwhile, the Russian athletes at least get to compete directly with their international counterparts and develop their competency through this process. Even though this does not eliminate all the harms they suffer due to the sanctions, the harms are arguably minimised. Thus, individual-targeting sanctions in these sports competitions (e.g., FIFA, ISU (figure skating, synchronised skating), the Wimbledon Championships) violate the discrimination principle for the failure to minimise harm.

One may notice that the process of minimising harm may impose additional costs on the sanctioners. Assuming that sports organisations have the financial capacity to bear such costs (which is plausible), I argue that they are morally required to do so. First, from a just war theory perspective, all moral rules in war bring certain disadvantages to the party that obeys them (Walzer 2006). The mere presence of additional costs thus provides no reason to reject the relevant moral duty. Moreover, just war theory is arguably less stringent than moral rules for civilians.¹³ Given that sports organisations are not direct participants in war, the rules governing their sanctions may need to be stricter than those applicable to the belligerents to approximate the rules applicable to civilians. If just war theory requires sanctioners to bear additional costs to minimise harms, then this requirement could only be stricter in the context of civilian ethics. Thus, sports organisations who conduct individual-targeting sanctions should take measures to minimise harm even at their own costs, without compromising their strategic motive.

The above discussion may raise another question: how legitimate is it for sports organisations to attempt to influence the outcome of a war given that they are neither governments nor military groups? I argue that the non-governmental and non-military nature of sports organisations does not preclude the moral legitimacy for them to affect the outcome of a war. Contrary to the Russian government's complaint that sports organisations should stay apolitical, a deeper reflection on the relationship between sports and politics should reveal that it is neither feasible nor desirable to divorce sports from politics. The work of Næss (2020; 2018; 2022) explains this point well. It is not feasible for sports to be apolitical because, as Næss points out, some political issues (e.g., the Israel–Palestine conflict) are so controversial that *any* action indicates support for a political view. It is not desirable for sports to be apolitical because sports organisations' (in)actions can cause harm through complicity with perpetrators of human rights abuses. If we abandon the myth of mutual exclusivity between sports and politics, then there is no good reason to forbid sports

¹² This option is admittedly infeasible for sports where many teams or individuals compete together (e.g., running). Organisations conducting individual-targeting sanctions in those sports may thus be said to have minimised the harms without compromising the strategic motive.

¹³ Here I bracket reductionism, which posits that the same principle applies in both war and peacetime.

organisations from influencing the outcome of wars if the motives, means and expected consequences are morally justifiable.

The above arguments assume that the harms inflicted on Russian athletes by the individual-targeting sanctions are *intended*. There are good reasons to believe that this assumption holds. Pattison (2015) distinguishes *motive* from *intention*: the former refers to the actor's ultimate goal, while the latter refers to outcomes that one wants to bring about to achieve the motive. Just war theory, and the deontological ethics underlying it, is concerned with the latter. For individual-targeting sanctions, an important part of the harms to athletes—being denied publicity—is the wanted outcome in order to avoid emboldening the Russian government. Such harms are thus intended.¹⁴

Before ending this subsection, two possible objections must be considered. The first objection goes as follows. The arguments in this section assume that Russian athletes banned from international competitions suffer harm. It may be argued that the harm is only substantial for athletes who would have qualified for the competitions but were prevented from participating by the sanctions. Yet we do not know who, among those being banned, would have qualified if not for the sanctions, for even a highly competent athlete may fail to qualify due to bad luck, injuries and so on. Given the uncertainties inherent in competitive sports, the objection goes, it cannot be said that the impacts of the sanctions constitute (substantial) harm to any specific, identifiable athletes.

I argue that this objection fails for the following reasons. First and foremost, the epistemic limitation described above does not diminish the badness of the sanction. Air pollution, for instance, can cause lung cancer, and we do not need to identify those with cancer *who would have been cancer-free if not for the pollution* before concluding that such pollution is harmful. Instead, as long as there is a good chance that some people—even if we do not know their identity—will get cancer this way, it is reasonable to say that the pollution causes harm. The same reasoning should apply to sports sanctions as well. As long as there is a good chance that some athletes who would have qualified will be denied entry by the sanctions, we can say that the sanctions cause harm. Second, the assumption that such sanctions have no individual identifiable victims is also false. Some organisations executed individual-targeting sanctions by pulling out Russian athletes who *had qualified* for the competition, such as the 2022 Paralympic Games. Furthermore, athletes can also be harmed when they are denied participation in the qualifiers of larger competitions which sometimes also feature intense competition and extensive publicity. In such cases, identifiable victims of the sanctions do exist. Overall, the objection appealing to the lack of specific, identifiable victims fails.

¹⁴ Note that sports organisations cannot appeal to the action-omission distinction to escape criticism. Specifically, they cannot escape criticism by reframing the sanctions as merely *not admitting* Russian athletes. This is because they have a positive duty to uphold the fairness of competition and admit qualified, rule-abiding athletes without discrimination based on nationality. This is admitted with honesty in the statements of the International Olympic Committee and International Paralympic Committee. Thus, regardless of how the sanctions are framed, sports organisations still fail a duty in order to achieve their motive and are thus still subject to deontological criticism.

The second objection goes as follows. It has been argued in this section that organisers fail the discrimination principle for not exempting non-agents from the sanctions. Yet if the age threshold for agency is set at 18 (or 16) years old, then the non-agents also happen to be minors from the perspective of labour protection. Given the mounting criticism of child labour exploitation in elite sports industries (Donnelly 2024; Matthews et al. 2024; Weber 2009; Centre for Sport and Human Rights 2022), it may be argued that young Russian athletes in fact benefit from the sanctions *because* they are prevented from joining those elite competitions that harm them. The failure to exclude them from sanctions, in turn, does not violate the discrimination principle.

The key problem with this objection is its assumption that being banned from such elite competitions protects and thus benefits those young athletes. This assumption does not hold because, as argued in the cited literature on child labour in sports, most harms to young athletes occur in the training stage. As elite athletes, it is plausible to assume that, even if they are banned from certain competitions, they must still undergo training to maintain their competency until retirement. Thus, it is not clear that such sanctions can meaningfully protect such athletes from exploitation or abuse.¹⁵ Overall, then, it cannot be assumed that individual-targeting sanctions benefit the younger athletes, and thus the objection fails.

In short, individual-targeting sanctions violate the discrimination principle in two ways. First, the failure to exempt athletes who are not agents of strategic threats from the sanctions violates this principle. Second, for sports events that can feasibly allow Russian athletes to participate while blocking off media and audience access, have the duty to do so since this inflicts less harm on the former. The failure to do so, then, violates the principle.

Non-strategic motives

Just war theory judges intended harms more stringently than unintended ones (Coady 2004), which is consistent with the deontological doctrine of double effect. The natural question that follows, then, is whether the individual-targeting sanctions may be interpreted as not targeting athletes so that the harms which they suffer may be considered unintended and such sanctions may be justified. I have argued that such harms cannot be interpreted as unintended if the sanctions have the strategic motive of avoiding emboldening parties that contribute to war. In this subsection, I consider instead the possibility of reframing the *motive* of the sanctions so that the harms inflicted on athletes may be interpreted as unintended. The most promising strategy, I believe, is to argue that the motive of the sanctions is to *punish* the

¹⁵ It is worth noting that banning athletes from competitions after they have gone through training means that they suffer the harms associated with training and yet reap none of the benefits of performing well in those competitions. This can make those athletes feel disappointed, regardless of whether the benefits of performing well ultimately outweigh the harms. Note also that I raised the issue of cult status surrounding star athletes in Sect. "Introduction". I do not think it undermines my argument here, since the cult can still be formed, if the Russian athlete wishes, within the domestic fanbase, and this possibility is especially salient if sports are used to incite nationalist sentiments in Russia.

Russian state. Here, “punishment” may be understood by borrowing Hugo Grotius’s definition, “an evil of suffering which is inflicted because of an evil of action” (Grotius 1925). The intent of the sanctions is then no longer restricting athletes’ publicity (which is directed at those individuals), but to frustrate the state’s interest in its presence in prestigious events, in this case sports competitions. The motive behind this intent is to punish the perpetrator, the political justification of which may range from deterrence and retribution (Nossal 1989) to expression of moral condemnation (Baldwin 2020; Gordon 1999). This motive is considered non-strategic as it does not necessarily tie to the outcome of this ongoing war.

An important note before considering justifications for the sanctions through the above strategy. Even though three possible justifications for the punishment have been listed above, the retributive and expressive justifications may not be theoretically tenable. The retributive justification is problematic because it assumes that the state as a collective entity can have interests in a morally relevant sense, an ideology underlying authoritarianism according to Popper’s (2013) critique. The expressive justification may be problematic because it is unclear whether sports organisations have the moral authority to make *legitimate* condemnation. This is especially a problem since parties expressing the condemnation are likely to be influenced by biases or even prejudices (Nossal 1989). Appealing to deterrence may better justify the sanction as punishing Russia. It does not have to assume that a state has interests that are morally significant—it only requires such interests to be of concern to the decision-making part(ies) in the state. It also does not require the sanctioner to have moral authority—the questionable moral track record of the United States does not badly undermine the deterrent weight of the sanctions it wields (if any), for instance.

Suppose the motive of sanctions can be assumed legitimate, how, then should we reframe the sanctions as punishing the Russian state? I argue that the most promising way to do so is to invoke what Hardimon (1994) terms “role-based responsibility” (RBR). RBR refers to moral duty arising from one’s role in an *institution* which is defined as a self-reproducing structure that has rules to specify positions within it and to regulate members’ behaviour. Typical examples of institutions include polities, families and companies/organisations. RBR suggests that by virtue of one being a citizen means one has specific duties towards the state, on top of the universal moral duty applicable to everyone.¹⁶ RBR is applicable to this paper because it can be extended to justify citizens’ duty to passively “bear the costs of [the state’s] moral debts” without partaking of the moral blame on the state (Francis 2021). Francis argues that when the state is held responsible for its moral failures, one’s role as a citizen bestows on one the duty to bear the cost for the state. Francis further argues that this is not punishing citizens for the wrongs of the state, for citizens’ role-based duty is relative to and directed towards the state, rather than the victims of the moral wrongs. Fullinwider (2000) makes a similar case for collective reparations

¹⁶ There are, to be sure, other studies on role-based moral-political duties. However, many of them focus on how such roles entail a duty to act in a certain way (Lazar 2010; Zheng 2018) or how blames can be attributed to individuals when wrongdoings are conducted by the group (Räikkä 1997; Held 2002; Abbarno 1993).

to American Blacks: though the Whites today are not responsible to the Blacks for slavery, the U.S. as a state is responsible and should pay reparations to the Blacks. The U.S. citizens, then, should accept this usage of their tax money because they have a civil duty to bear the moral debt that the state has incurred.

With the concepts laid out, I will formulate an argument on the sanctioner's behalf. The principal agents that dictated the escalation of the Russian–Ukraine war were the states, most prominently Russia, rather than individual politicians or civilians. Similarly, the punishment is also meted out against the Russian state, and takes the form of denying Russia official or unofficial representations in international sports. In this case, the athletes are official representatives of the state if they compete under the Russian flag. However, they can still be considered unofficial representations of the state even if they compete under neutral flag, since the audience still ties those athletes to the Russian identity. The harms of being denied participation in such sports events may then be interpreted as neither punishment against the athletes, nor using them as mere means for strategic ends, but rather as athletes bearing the cost for their state given their role as representatives of the state. This duty, in fact, corresponds to the benefits which they are entitled to: as representatives of the state, they attract national attention whenever they represent Russia, which then leads to economic opportunities and even state investments for them.¹⁷

At this point, one would be forgiven for thinking that I argue in favour of individual-targeting sports sanctions. I do not, for there is one argument that absolves Russian citizens, including the athletes, of the duty to bear the cost for the state. Hardimon's RBR framework not only explains why such duties arise, but also explains when they diminish. Hardimon acknowledges that prescribing institutional duty can be threatening if it is unchosen, or worse, against one's will, and designs an "exit clause" for such duty. Specifically, the duty is void if it is derived from an *unjust* institution. Hardimon explains justice in this case by invoking reflective acceptability, the notion that a (reasonable) person would hypothetically accept the duty after reflecting on the arrangements of the institution.

I argue that the Russian state is not a just institution. By being not content with the annexation of Crimea and escalating the war with Ukraine, the Russian state not only puts at risk its soldiers but also lets the overall economy be burdened by renewed economic sanctions. Arguably, reasonable and rational civilians would not have accepted such an institution upon reflection. This argument stands even with Putin's high support rate,¹⁸ or in the words of Buzan (2002), the fact that Russian people "deserve their government". Popular support for a national leader does not mean that the state is reflectively acceptable since, as Buzan himself notes, the support may be fully or partially coerced. It may also be misinformed by censorship and

¹⁷ This strategy to justify the sanctions is not available if the aims were the strategic aims explained in Sect. "Strategic motive". This is because it is not plausible to reframe the aim to avoid emboldening the Putin regime or boosting soldiers' morale as actions against the Russian state. Moreover, as shown in the next paragraph, whether the strategic aims can be reframed this way does not affect my overall conclusion.

¹⁸ 'Putin Approval Remains High Throughout Ukraine Invasion'. <https://www.statista.com/chart/28383/putin-approval/>, 22 February 2023.

propaganda, or simply because there is a lack of a better alternative. In the case of Russia, findings of the Laboratory of Public Sociology study suggest that the key reasons for popular support for the war include the beliefs that Ukraine is fascist, that residents of Donbas are in danger and that Russia must pre-empt an inevitable attack from “the West” (Erpyleva 2023). To the extent that such beliefs are misinformed, the popular support is not indicative of the reflective acceptability of the Putin government. Thus, I maintain the position that the Russian state is not a just institution. This means athletes’ duty to bear the cost of the punishment sustained by the state is void. The attempt to craft a justification for individual-targeting sports sanctions consistent with just war theory, therefore, fails.

In short, just war theory judges individual-targeting sports sanctions as wrong since they fail to minimise the harms created or exclude non-agents of strategic threat. The harms may be reframed as athletes bearing the cost for the state, but the irresponsibility of the Putin regime means that they are not obliged to do so. Overall, then, just war theory judges such sanctions as wrong.

Consequentialist considerations

Given the lack of historical precedence, there is no direct evidence on the comparison of benefits and harms of sports sanctions in response to interstate aggressions. I thus assess the individual-targeting sports sanctions from two angles. First, I use empirical studies on the effect of economic sanctions to estimate that of individual-targeting sports sanctions. Second, I assess the effect of such sanctions through armchair analysis. The analyses should apply to both act and rule consequentialism because the analyses are either based on general trends of historical cases, or reasonings applicable to contexts other than the 2022 Russian case.

Assessing the effects of sports sanctions through empirical evidence on economic sanctions

Since the 1990s, economic sanctions have been increasingly imposed by states and international entities on other states (Gordon 1999). Such sanctions inflict intentional harms such as trade disruptions and travel restrictions, aiming to pressure the sanctioned countries to stop their wrongdoings, such as domestic human rights abuses or interstate aggression. Most quantitative empirical studies on the impacts of such sanctions focus on how effectively they achieve such aims. There is also a smaller body of evidence on their deterrent effect which is usually not stated as an aim of the sanctions.¹⁹ Thus, this subsection is also scoped to the above effects that have been quantitatively studied. The more effective the economic sanctions are in achieving their explicit aims, then, the better the benefit-to-harm ratio they have in

¹⁹ There are also some studies on the effects of sanctions on the state of democracy and freedom in the target state. I bracket such literature here because it is not clear if and how the mechanisms behind such effects (increasing domestic dissent and unrest) are applicable to sports sanctions.

the consequentialist calculus. Similarly, the better the deterrent effects, the better the benefit-to-harm ratio.

An important assumption in this subsection is that individual-targeting sporting sanctions have a similar benefit-to-harm ratio to economic sanctions. Put figuratively, I assume that the former is a “miniature” version of the latter, entailing a narrower scope, less harm and lower (prospect of) benefits than the latter. This is a reasonable assumption since, in the absence of better sources of empirical evidence about properties of entity A, one may use properties of another entity, B, whose properties are known and is the most similar to A, to approximate A’s properties. Here, economic sanctions provide the best proxy for individual-targeting sporting sanctions, since both can be made in the context of interstate aggressions, and both may be seen as aiming to use disruptions to achieve a political aim. With such considerations, I shall make my argument by inferring the benefit-harm balance of economic sanctions from the relevant literature and equating the benefit-harm ratio of individual-targeting sports sanctions to that of the economic sanctions.

Studies have provided insights into the effectiveness of economic sanctions in achieving their aims. Peksen (2019) argues that sanctions targeting specific economic sectors, weapons and travel restrictions elicit discernible policy change in the sanctioned states only 20% of the time. Hufbauer (2009) analyses all types of sanctions and argues that their success rate is 35%. Hufbauer also suggests that sanctions tend to be less effective in countries that are “strong, stable, hostile, and autocratic” (p. 167), partly because they suppress dissent more effectively and they expect future sanctions. This pattern was consistent with the findings of Peksen and Drury (2009) who suggest that sanctions tend to reduce rather than improve the domestic political freedom and international cooperativeness of the target state. They follow Drury and Li (2006) and argue that the sanctioned regimes may fear that giving in to one sanction invites more in the future. It is interesting that different conclusions may be drawn from the above evidence. Peksen (2019) argues that there is “some consensus” that sanctions tend to fail their objectives, while Pattison (2015) argues that there is “little consensus” on sanctions’ effectiveness, because existing studies do not (and probably cannot), *ceteris paribus*, compare the effect of sanctions with that of other policy options. Here, I agree with Peksen because, despite picking on the lack of comparative studies, Pattison only analyses two possible alternatives to sanctions: war and doing nothing (soft diplomacy only). This seems to suggest that more effective, non-war alternatives to sanctions are hard to come by in the first place.

As indicated earlier, there is also some quantitative evidence on the deterrent effects of sanctions. Carneiro (2014) analyses sanctions in Latin America and argues that, even though sanctions may not effectively improve human rights in targeted states, they may improve human rights in the neighbouring states, pointing to a potential deterrent effect. Petrescu (2007) suggests that sanctions decrease the target states’ possibility of being involved in a militarised dispute by 9% at a mean GNP ratio of 563:1 between the sanctioner and the target. Both sources have clear limitations: Carneiro’s study is limited to Latin America, while Petrescu’s study is not published in a peer-reviewed journal. Overall, then, evidence for the deterrent effects of sanctions is weak.

With the above evidence, I argue that the benefit-to-harm ratio of economic sanctions is low. This is because the general success rate of such sanctions is already low (20–35%), while the deterrence rate of 9% is even lower. Moreover, specific to the context of Russia, its unfavourable characteristics (large, hostile and autocratic) may further reduce the potential benefit of sanctions.²⁰ The grim prospect of success coupled with the intended harms of sanctions thus leads me to infer a low benefit-to-harm ratio. This low ratio does not, of course, automatically equate with *net harm*. Nevertheless, given the general unfavourable attitude expressed by the empirical studies towards sanctions and the weak evidence for sanctions' deterrent effects, there is stronger reason to believe that sanctions' harms outweigh their benefits than otherwise, in which case consequentialism may judge the sanctions wrong. If one does not commit to the net harm of economic sanctions, then the consequentialist would be neutral about such sanctions, given the rejection of the key assumption at the last step of inference.

With the above analysis on the potential effects of economic sanctions, and given that we assume that sports sanctions have a similar benefit-to-harm ratio to economic sanctions, the consequentialist judgement on the sports sanction would therefore be either wrong, or neutral.

One caveat of the above analysis is that since it is scoped to only focus on impacts for which there is quantitative evidence, there remains the possibility that other impacts not reviewed may tip the benefit–harm balance. Such impacts may include, for example, encouraging or discouraging effects on non-state actors' cooperation with and assistance to the warring states, effects on other countries' perceptions of the current world order and nationalistic sentiments and so on. These effects may apply equally well to economic and sports sanctions, and will be briefly considered in the next subsection.

Assessing the effects of sports sanctions through armchair analysis

The above subsection assumes that studies on economic sanctions are more generalisable to sports sanctions than other areas of studies do. If we dismiss the generalisability of findings on economic sanctions to sports sanctions, then the effects of sports sanctions need to be assessed without relying on empirical data. This subsection thus analyses the benefits and harms of individual-targeting sports sanctions through armchair analysis, in two steps. First, I assess the immediate impacts of such sanctions on athletes and stakeholders in the sports industry. I term such impacts “civil impacts”. This is to contrast with what I term “political impacts”, which refer to macro-scale impacts discernible at the social or national level such as policy and border changes, popular support or opposition to the government and its decisions, nationalist sentiments and so on. In the second step, I proceed to argue that it is unfruitful to conduct armchair consequentialist analysis on such political impacts of sanctions.

²⁰ This pattern should hold true for both economic and sports sanctions since part of the driving force behind this pattern (fear of inviting future sanctions) presumably applies to both types of sanctions.

Civil impacts

First, I consider the civil impacts of individual-targeting sanctions. The sanctions' immediate harms on Russian athletes are explained in Sect. "Just war theory", including the loss of opportunity to compete and excel and to receive economic benefits that come with publicity and sponsorships. Other than harms to athletes, another immediate harm to the stakeholders worth noting is the frustration of the audience who wish Russian athletes to compete and excel. Yet for each immediate harm considered above, there is a corresponding immediate benefit. It is reasonable to assume that each excluded Russian athlete is replaced by a non-Russian athlete who otherwise would not have qualified for the competition. The harm–benefit balance in this case depends on the training and competitive opportunities of those athletes outside of those competitions that conduct individual-targeting sanctions. If, for example, an athlete has multiple high-standard and lucrative competitions to choose from, then being able/unable to compete in one of them benefits/harms the athlete much less than if one does not have such luxury of choice. Similarly, corresponding to the frustration of some audiences, such sanctions satisfy those who do not wish Russian athletes to compete and excel, and the harm–benefit balance depends on how many people root for or against Russian athletes. Overall, then, when evaluating the civil impacts of the sanctions, the judgement based on consequentialism would be inconclusive.

Here, I acknowledge the possibility that the sanctions may also indirectly harm non-Russian athletes who win the competition, since some audience members may perceive the win as having a lower value because Russian athletes are absent. Nevertheless, I do not analyse this possibility in detail here because it should not change my conclusion. It is reasonable to suppose that those winners also benefit from the absence of Russian athletes: otherwise, they would have faced a higher risk of losing. It is hard to compare the benefits and harms to those winners in this case, because the comparison hinges on each athlete' relative prospect of winning. Thus, the overall benefit–harm balance for the non-Russian winners is also inconclusive.²¹

The bottom line: a consequentialist judgement on the civil impacts of individual-targeting sports sanctions is most plausibly inconclusive.

The futility of assessing political impacts

The situation is less clear when considering macro-scale, political impacts of individual-targeting sports sanctions. I offer three explanations why it is unfruitful to assess such impacts on a consequentialist basis. First, without empirical evidence to set the scope of analysis, the range of impacts is too wide to be assessed comprehensively. I have, for instance, considered various political aims (and thus possible benefits) of such sanctions, ranging from limiting the power of Russian propaganda

²¹ One may also argue that the absence of certain athletes would not affect the prestige of the win or medals since competitive sports are much about uncertainties and many do win partly due to factors outside of the competition itself (e.g., competitors' injury, accident, problems with their sports club).

to deterring states from committing future wrongdoings. Other than the above purposes, sanctions may also be interpreted as communicating power and threat (Baldwin 2020) which may also be associated with their benefits and harms (e.g., changing stakeholders' perceptions of the role of sports in international politics). I have also noted such sanctions' potential impacts on non-state actors' decisions and people's perceptions of politics. Such impacts may manifest in, for example, setting a role model for businesses to pull out of Russia, creating or entrenching some people's perception that the current world order is against the geopolitical rivals²² of the U.S. and the ensuing nationalism, creating or entrenching scepticism of the morality of international politics and so on. To compare all of these impacts would be unfeasible, since the nature of the changes elicited differs too widely to be commensurable. Even utilitarians who attempt to reduce all effects into pain and pleasure will likely fail to make the comparison, since quantifying the utility involved in the above changes is unfeasible at the current level of knowledge. Thus, the lack of a basis of comparison for the *magnitude* of impacts renders the consequentialist assessment unfruitful.

Second, even if the *magnitude* of impacts can somehow be determined, the *probability* of such impacts remains uncertain. This is especially the case given that the impacts considered above, though theoretically possible, have a small probability of making a morally significant difference. A boost in Russian soldiers' morale by an athlete's win, for example, may not matter unless it is of such intensity and occurs at such a timing that it happens to cause the army to win a battle that it would have otherwise lost. One may even deem this battle win as unimportant unless it affects the outcome of the war. The problem with assessing outcomes like a sports-induced battle win is that their probability is so low that we are essentially evaluating a *mere theoretical possibility* of something very bad or good happening. Humans are especially susceptible to questionable heuristics when assessing such low-probability scenarios (Sunstein 2003; Gigerenzer 2004; Rottenstreich and Hsee 2001). Thus, it is unfruitful to assess such impacts through armchair thinking when we do not have quantitative data to support our evaluations.

Third, bracketing the uncertainties over the *probability* and *magnitude* of the impacts, our judgement may still be burdened by uncertainties over the *direction* of the impacts. This is because many of the impacts manifest in the long term and may differ from the trend that we expect in the short term. This is especially the case in international politics as the outcomes of an action depend very much on how other parties react to it. Take, for example, the withdrawal of businesses from Russia. It may have the positive impact of increasing the chance of Putin aborting the invasion out of economic woes, but also the risk of creating an economic vacuum only to

²² Other cases of interstate aggression by the U.S. and its geopolitical allies did not receive any individual-targeting sporting sanctions. Examples include the Vietnam War, Saudi Arabia's bombing of Yemen, Israel's constant violation of the United Nations resolution and so on. Coincidentally or not, both Nossal (1989) and Amnesty International point out such discrepancies in international response when similar tragedies happen to victims of different regions/ethnicities. See 'Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The state of the world's human rights', <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/5670/2023/en/>, 27 March 2023.

be filled by Russia's geopolitical allies, reducing Russia's dependence on Europe.²³ Given the inherent uncertainties in international politics, I tend to agree with Lenman (2000) that consequentialism may indeed be "clueless" in this case, until there is sufficient empirical knowledge on such sports sanctions.

In short, I argue that consequentialism either judges the individual-targeting sanctions as wrong or is neutral about it when making inferences based on evidence on economic sanctions. Its assessment of the civil impacts through armchair analysis is inconclusive, and it is not useful for assessing the political impacts through armchair analysis.

Discussion and future studies

I have critiqued individual-targeting sanctions, and the analysis suggests that just war theory and consequentialism provide broadly consistent judgements on such sanctions—the judgement is either that such sanctions are wrong, or is neutral/inconclusive. Overall, then, we have a stronger reason to judge such sanctions as wrong based on these two theories than otherwise. Other philosophers have approached this issue from different angles, and it is worthwhile to compare this paper with their work. Wiater (2023) justifies individual-targeting sanctions (in Wiater's term, "collective exclusion") by arguing that those are proportionate means to achieve legitimate aims. Such legitimate aims include 1) protecting Ukrainian athletes from witnessing "the display of war-glorifying symbols at sporting events" (p. 464) and 2) preventing Russian athletes' appearance in such competitions from feeding into Russian propaganda. Wiater and I share concerns over the potential for Russian athletes to contribute to propaganda (what I term "strategic threats"). Wiater's conclusion differs from mine because Wiater assumes that individual-targeting sanctions are "the only appropriate means" to the above two aims (p. 465). I do not agree with this assumption because, as explained in Sect. "Just war theory", aim 2) can be fulfilled by allowing Russian athletes to compete without publicity, and aim 1) can be fulfilled by further making sure not to match Russia with Ukraine. To the extent that the above arrangements are feasible, I do not have to adopt Wiater's conclusion.

Another philosopher who addresses this issue is Næss (2024). Næss approaches this issue from the perspective of human rights and suggests that the rights at stake include Russian athletes' right to practise sports without discrimination and Ukrainians' right to "life, liberty and security" (p. 9). Næss then argues in favour of individual-targeting sanctions because the latter rights are more important than and thus takes precedence over the former. I agree with Næss's prioritisation of rights, and my arguments do not preclude the legitimacy of Næss's conclusion. Nevertheless, I do not share the conclusion with Næss that individual-targeting sanctions are morally right because, as explained in Sect. "Consequentialist considerations", I am not confident of the prospect of such sanctions in achieving strategic aims such as ending the war and protecting Ukrainians. Hence, to the extent that my pessimism of

²³ There is already some evidence of this happening. See the analysis by Martin (2024).

the efficacy of such sanctions holds, I do not have to amend my position in favour of Næss's.

Besides examining the individual-targeting sanctions primarily as measures implemented in response to the war, such sanctions can also be evaluated as measures for the smooth operation of those sports events and protecting sports organisations' own "interest" (Duval 2023; Jamali et al. 2023). This is further complicated by the intimate link between sport and politics, which means sports organisations inevitably face pressures from political powers around the world when deciding whether and how to impose such sanctions (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2023). Thus, future studies may examine the ethical justifiability of such sanctions from the perspective of organisational ethics.

Conclusion

In summary, just war theory and consequentialism provide broadly consistent judgements on individual-targeting sanctions. Just war theory judges such sanctions as wrong because they target non-agents and fail to minimise harm. Consequentialism also judges such sanctions as wrong if quantitative empirical findings about economic sanctions were to be generalised to such sanctions. When not referring to such evidence, consequentialism is either neutral about such sanctions, or unable to produce useful judgements due to empirical uncertainties. I argue that, based on the above considerations, we have stronger reasons to believe that such sanctions are wrong than otherwise. This is, of course, not a verdict that such sanctions are surely wrong, since there are other moral theories through which the sanctions may be assessed.

What I do advocate for, however, is greater empathy for the Russian people, civilians and athletes alike. Regardless of their duty towards the Russian state, they are victims of circumstances, just like the Ukrainian people. Unfortunately, during times of heightened hostility, it is tempting to judge people based on their identity labels, in this case, their nationality. This causes people to see those with undesirable labels as more deserving of pain and suffering, which may explain the urge to eject not just the Russian flag, but anyone related to Russia from international sports competitions, regardless of their feelings and needs.

During Japan's invasion of China in World War II, Mao Zedong once commented: "The interests of the Chinese people and the Japanese people are aligned, and they have the same enemies, namely Japanese imperialism and the bad elements²⁴ of the Chinese people". I believe the same lesson applies to the current Russian–Ukraine war. During an interstate aggression, it is tempting to frame it as a war between the Russian *people* and the Ukrainian *people*. Yet this should not be the case. Hatred among people should never be stoked. Instead, if

²⁴ Mao was presumably referring to the Kuomintang. One does not have to agree with either Mao's ideology in general or Mao's claim that the KMT was a "bad element" of the Chinese people to acknowledge the insight of this quote.

one really cares about the pains and pleasures, the justice and the dignity of the individuals, one should realise that the real enemies are imperialists and the “bad elements” in Russia and Ukraine: oligarchs who usurp the state machine for personal enrichment, hawkish demagogues who have a penchant for expansionism and conspiracy theory, corrupt and incompetent officials who siphon off wealth from the working masses and an ailing economic system created by over-zealous marketisation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such enemies exist most prominently in Russia, but also in Ukraine to some extent. Understood this way, it may be seen that efforts like ejecting the Russian athletes to purportedly limit Russia’s “global influence” presupposes the homogeneity of the Russian identity, painting the entire Russian people with the same brush as if they are no different from those “bad elements”. How is such over-generalisation different from (hypothetically) “cancelling” all Catholics because the Pope has said something morally wrong? Thus, I would like to end the paper with a plea for everyone to constantly examine one’s own prejudices, and never let hatred trump empathy. Many in the international community, however, seem to fail in this respect.

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