



OPINION

Alexander Ovechkin used his fame to back Putin. We must remember that

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NHL star Alexander Ovechkin's likeness is displayed in Moscow's business district. Patriotism does not require blind allegiance to a corrupt and criminal regime that acts against its own people's interests, Marcus Kolga and Dominik Hasek write.

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Vladimir Putin's imperialist war of aggression and domestic political repression has received a celebrity endorsement from Alexander Ovechkin, the NHL's all-time leading goal scorer and captain of the Washington Capitals.

In early September, Mr. Ovechkin appeared in a political campaign video for Mr. Putin's United Russia party ahead of Russian parliamentary "elections," with some of the most powerful figures in the Putin regime, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and leading Kremlin propagandist Margarita Simonyan.

When questioned about his appearance in Mr. Putin's United Russia ad, Mr. Ovechkin did not claim any coercion, nor did he suggest that he had been pressured into appearing. He stated plainly, "Well, they asked me to do that. I said yes," and continued, "I'm Russian, and I support my country ... I'm for peace and love."

While Mr. Ovechkin's Russian identity and his connections to the country are normal, his decision to lend his name, image and fame to endorse the repressive political apparatus that sustains Mr. Putin's rule and the war he launched against Ukraine is not.

This is not Mr. Ovechkin's first foray into the world of Russian politics. In 2017 he founded a social-media movement titled "PutinTeam" ahead of Russia's 2018 presidential elections – despite clearly escalating domestic repression and Russia's continuing support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

The Kremlin's tactical use of celebrities to whitewash its criminal war has already been recognized by the government of Canada.

In February, 2023, Ottawa sanctioned 38 Russian media personalities and cultural figures and 16 entities involved in promoting Kremlin disinformation and propaganda. In announcing the measures, the Canadian government warned that the Kremlin had enlisted celebrities to amplify its pro-war narratives.

Later that same year, Canada imposed another round of sanctions on 19 individuals from Russia's cultural and education sectors, including people who used music, concerts and film to promote Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Canada's sanctions regulations state that the government can list anyone engaged in activities that "facilitate, support ... or contribute to" a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty or territorial integrity.

Nina L. Khrushcheva: Putin takes a page from the Soviet playbook

Mr. Ovechkin's defence, "I'm Russian, and I support my country," blurs a distinction that should otherwise be obvious: Patriotism does not require blind allegiance to a corrupt and criminal regime that acts against its own people's interests. Mr. Ovechkin's conduct should be held to the same standard.

Russian pro-democratic opposition leader and former chess world champion Garry Kasparov told us that "there is nothing patriotic about lending your fame to Vladimir Putin's dictatorship and his criminal war against Ukraine. Russia is not Putin, and Russians who have risked their freedom and their lives opposing him understand that very well. When a globally recognized athlete chooses to



Mr. Ovechkin speaks to reporters last week about his appearance in the campaign ad.

KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

appear in propaganda for Putin's repression machine, he is making a political choice and that decision should be judged accordingly.”

Alexander Ovechkin's endorsement reinforces Vladimir Putin's efforts to fuse patriotism with loyalty to him, his regime and acceptance of its crimes.



Mr. Putin chairs a virtual meeting with government members in Moscow on Wednesday.

VYACHESLAV PROKOFYEV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Millions of Russians have opposed Mr. Putin and thousands have been arrested for protesting his war. Others have fled the country. Journalists have been imprisoned or forced into exile, while opposition figures have been jailed, killed or driven abroad. On Sept. 15, the U.S. Department of Justice unsealed an indictment alleging that a Russian intelligence network plotted to kill dissidents abroad, including an alleged murder-for-hire operation on American soil.

Authoritarians have long understood the value of converting admiration for sporting heroes into political credibility.

In Nazi Germany, Fritz Szepan, captain of the German national football team and one of the country's greatest players, used his fame to support Adolf Hitler. The Schalke 04 football club's own historical research explains that Szepan campaigned for Hitler before several elections and "put his fame at the service" of the Nazi Party.

By choosing to lend his fame to Mr. Putin's corrupt and repressive political machine, Mr. Ovechkin has made himself a prominent symbol of a regime responsible for unspeakable crimes against the Ukrainian people: nightly destruction, murder, torture, rape and the forced abduction of more than 20,000 children.

Each time he steps onto the ice, that political choice will follow him. If Canada is serious about defending the lives of Ukrainians and Russians alike, it cannot ignore that choice. Not even the most beautiful game in the world – a game that is part of Canada's national identity – should ever be placed above human life.

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