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Russian Doping Chief Says Thousands of Drug Tests Were Manipulated

An admission by the top Russian antidoping official could complicate his country's bid to avoid severe penalties from the World Anti-Doping Agency.

By **Tariq Panja**

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COLORADO SPRINGS — Russia made thousands of changes to the drug-test results of an unspecified number of its athletes, the head of the country's own antidoping agency said this week, confirming the suspicions of global officials who are considering severe penalties against Russian sports programs.

The official, Yuri Ganus, the director general of the Russian antidoping agency, suggested in an interview at a conference in Colorado that the data had been concealed or altered to protect the reputations and positions of former star athletes who now have roles in government or who function as senior sports administrators in Russia.

His comments went farther than his previous remarks about possible Russian manipulation of doping results, and they could complicate the country's efforts to avoid new punishments from global antidoping officials. Russia was already barred from international sporting events, including the 2018 Winter Olympics, after the discovery of a broad, state-sponsored doping program in 2015.

In less than two weeks, a committee at the World Anti-Doping Agency will decide whether to press for more serious bans against Russian sports federations. Russia faces possible expulsion from international sports — a return to the pariah status that followed the 2015 discovery — if its authorities cannot provide an explanation for missing or manipulated test results in a database that Russia turned over to WADA.

Russia's promise to deliver that database of thousands of athlete records was a key factor in WADA's decision to lift a suspension of the country's antidoping agency in late 2018. That determination, criticized by athletes and other antidoping officials at the time, ended a three-year suspension that had been imposed after the discovery of one of the most audacious and sophisticated cheating schemes in history, a conspiracy that corrupted a number of major international sporting events, including several Olympics.

Ganus, 55, said Sunday that he believed only individuals with access to some of Russia's most powerful institutions could have been able to manipulate the data, which WADA investigators crosschecked against a separate set provided by a whistle-blower in 2017.

"In this case, you have to understand what has to be the power which will receive access," Ganus said.

Ganus said he had spoken out to ensure that current and future generations of Russian athletes do not suffer because of the actions of others.

But his outspokenness has come as a surprise to some, given the risks whistle-blowers with information related to the case appear to face. Two other Russian antidoping officials with ties to the scandal — including one of Ganus's predecessors — have died under suspicious circumstances in recent years, and Ganus said he believed the Russian authorities were monitoring his electronic communications and his phone calls, as well as conducting surveillance near his home.

"It's really dangerous for me," he said. But Ganus said he was driven to complete what he described as "the mission" to assure that a new generation of Russian athletes could return, untainted, to international sports.

"Russia is a high level sports country, but those people who are responsible to solve this situation for many years chose the wrong way, the wrong approach," he said.

There is a suspicion in sporting circles that Russia has allowed Ganus to speak out publicly so that he can separate the work of his agency, which has drawn praise from WADA for changes it has made, from that of the state authorities that control the Moscow laboratory where the athletes' data was stored. The government still considers that lab a crime scene under the control of state officials, not of domestic antidoping regulators.

"Certainly if he's speaking truth to power, maybe he's going to defect sometime soon or it's a strategic move," Travis Tygart, the head of the United States Anti-Doping Agency, said of Ganus. "I think the real issue is: Can the WADA system hold the national antidoping system responsible for something that the minister's office is ultimately responsible for?"

By lifting its ban on Russia last year before the country had complied with two remaining provisions of its so-called road map to reinstatement — namely, providing the athletes' data to WADA and acknowledging that Russia's doping program was state-controlled — WADA effectively freed the authorities who control the lab from the need to follow the terms of that agreement. Those officials might not fall under WADA's jurisdiction, as the Russian antidoping agency, known as Rusada, does.

“When they let them out of that road map, it put a lot of pressure on their ability under the new rules to hold Russia’s state minister’s office and sport community responsible through their authority over the national antidoping organization,” Tygart said. “That’s what’s going to come to a head. And let’s hope it does.”

Last month, the English lawyer Jonathan Taylor, who leads the WADA committee overseeing Russian compliance, said the country would need to “pull a rabbit out of the hat” to provide a credible explanation for anomalies in the data extracted from the Moscow lab.

Taylor’s committee will convene, probably by phone, on Oct. 23 to decide whether to recommend to WADA’s executive board that Russia be designated “noncompliant.” If the board agrees, a case most likely will be fast-tracked to the international Court of Arbitration for Sport for a final ruling.

In the past, individual sports had the power to decide whether to punish countries for doping offenses. But rules adopted in April 2018 mean a negative ruling for Russia at the arbitration court could trigger an automatic suspension for the country across a wide range of sports and federations bound by the WADA code. Under such a ban, Russian teams and athletes would be ineligible to compete in international sporting events, and the country would be barred from hosting them, until the WADA suspension was lifted.

That could lead to Russia’s missing out on next summer’s Olympics in Tokyo, and even put at risk its national soccer team’s participation in qualification matches for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

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Questions About Russian Doping Data Raise Fears About Manipulation Sept. 22, 2019



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