

Plushenko on Thin Ice After Olympic Dropout

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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SOCHI — Four days after being praised as a hero for helping Russia win its first gold at the Sochi Olympics, Yevgeny Plushenko on Friday was taking criticism for dropping out of the men's figure skating.

Plushenko's strong performance in the team event brought wide accolades for his determination to overcome injury. But on Thursday he withdrew before the men's short program, complaining of severe spinal pain during the warmup.

Plushenko was Russia's only men singles skater in Sochi. He won the slot in a closed exhibition skate that cut out Maxim Kovtun, who beat him in the Russian nationals.

Among his critics was longtime rival Alexei Yagudin, the 2002 Olympic gold medalist. He told the R-Sport news agency that he supports "people who go to the end."

"I think Zhenya will understand my words," he said, using the familiar version of Plushenko's name. "We always competed through the pain."

The choice of Plushenko as the sole Russian man was debatable. Although he was the dominant skater the past 15 years, with an Olympic gold and two silvers before coming to Sochi, he is 31 years old and underwent back surgery a year ago. When he was selected, advocates argued his long international experience made him a stronger choice than the 18-year-old Kovtun.

But that came under sharp questioning Friday.

"You should go when it is time," Ruslan Nugmatullin, a former Russian national soccer goalkeeper said on Twitter. "Kovtun earned the right to participate in Sochi 2014."

Alexei Urmanov, the 1994 Olympic gold medal winner, suggested that Plushenko's hubris backfired.

"It is on the conscience of Zhenya, the team and the federation," he was quoted by R-Sport as saying.

To some politicians, Plushenko's withdrawal was a blow to Russia's national pride.

"Perform through the pain for the honor of the country," Igor Lebedev, a State Duma member from the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, said on Twitter.

Yelena Vaitsekhovskaya, the figure skating correspondent for Russia's Sport-Express newspaper, seemed weary not only of the intrigue behind Plushenko's selection but also of the appearances of his flamboyant wife, Yana Rudkovskaya, in the mixed zone to support him.

"All of this was reminiscent of an incompetently directed stage show," she wrote. "It became harder and harder to sympathize with the athlete."

"The one-man show in Sochi has concluded. Real sport has begun," she said in the newspaper's Friday edition.

But more complaints may still come.

"After Sochi, the federation will have to answer for its choice," nationalist lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovskiy said.

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