

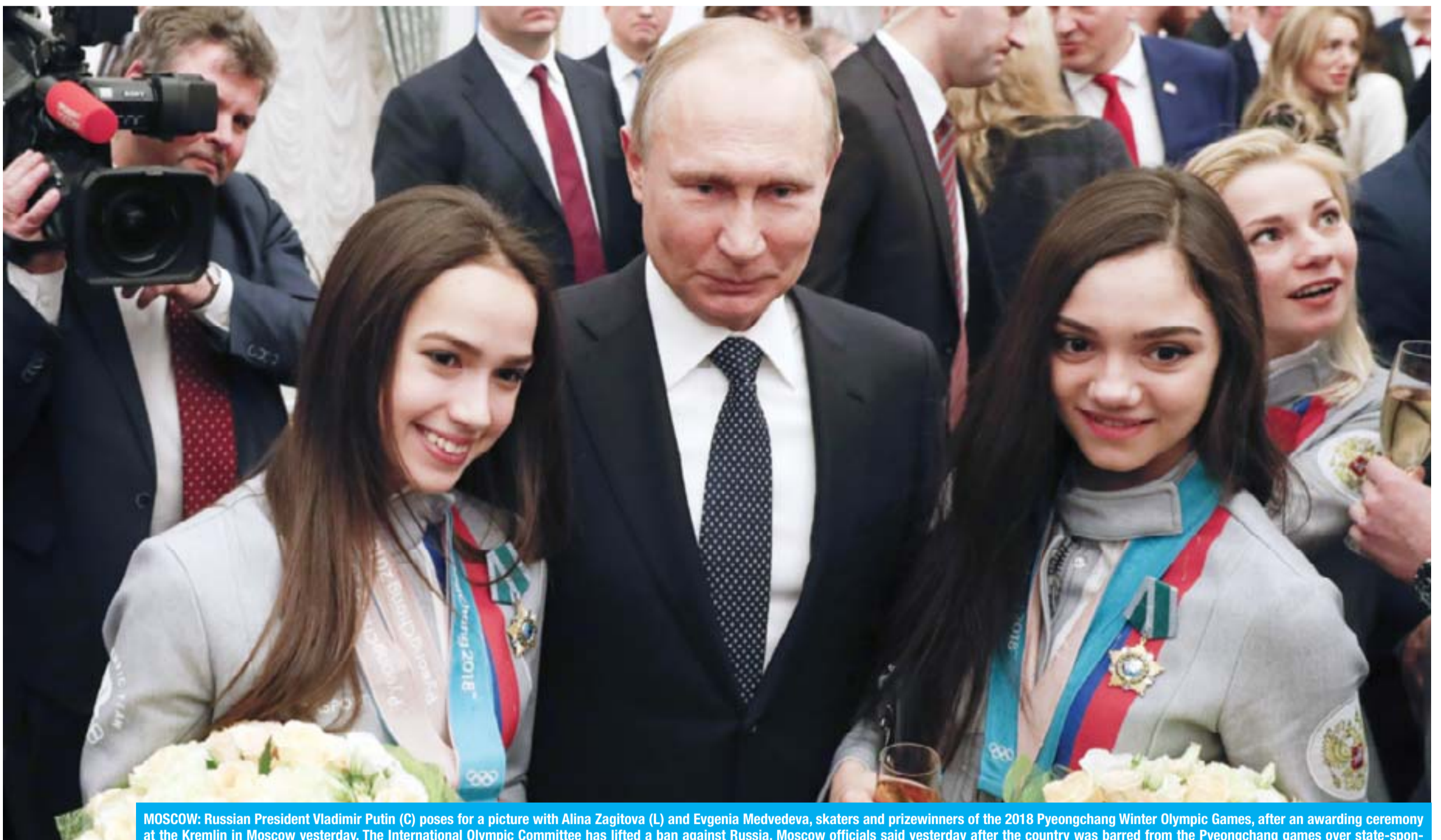
12 Eric Staal's hat trick leads Wild over Blues in lopsided 8-3 win



13 Futuristic superheroes picked as Tokyo 2020 Olympic mascots



14 Stokes steers England home in second New Zealand ODI



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) poses for a picture with Alina Zagitova (L) and Evgenia Medvedeva, skaters and prizewinners of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games, after an awarding ceremony at the Kremlin in Moscow yesterday. The International Olympic Committee has lifted a ban against Russia, Moscow officials said yesterday after the country was barred from the Pyeongchang games over state-sponsored doping. — AFP

IOC lifts doping ban on Russia

‘Rights of Russian Olympic Committee have been fully restored’

MOSCOW: The International Olympic Committee has lifted a ban against Russia, Moscow officials said yesterday, after the country was barred from the Pyeongchang games over state-sponsored doping.

“The rights of the Russian Olympic Committee have been fully restored,” said the president of the Russian Olympic Committee, Alexander Zhukov. Zhukov said Russia received a letter from the IOC yesterday which confirms that no other Olympic athletes from Russia had tested positive for doping, following two positive Russian drug tests at this month’s Winter Games in Pyeongchang.

“All of the doping tests that were conducted on our athletes in the last days of the Olympics were negative,” Zhukov said. The IOC decided in a meeting Sunday that in such an event the suspension of the Russian Olympic Committee would be lifted.

Russia was banned in December from taking part in the 2018 Olympics following revelations of widespread doping, though 168 athletes were deemed “clean” and were cleared to go to Pyeongchang to compete under the

Olympic flag. The time since the ban on December 5 was “probably some of the most difficult months in the history of Russian sports and the Olympic movement in Russia,” Zhukov said, praising athletes in particular for competing in “difficult conditions.”

“For us today’s decision by the IOC is very important.” “We are very relieved,” added Russian Olympic Committee vice president Stanislav Pozdnyakov. “A lot of what we did in the last three months of course will not be made public” he said.

“But the main thing is that our athletes... had the opportunity to represent... our country” in Korea, despite the team’s neutral status as “Olympic Athletes from Russia.”

Two Russians, curler Alexander Krushelnitsky and bobsledder Nadezhda Sergeeva, were kicked out of the Olympics after their doping tests were revealed to be positive, with Krushelnitsky being stripped of his bronze medal.

The scandal meant that the Olympic team from Russia could not use national colours or flag for the closing ceremony in Pyeongchang as originally hoped. Moscow blamed the two cases on “negligence rather than malicious intent,” while Krushelnitsky denied knowingly doping and some Russian media said his food was spiked by an ex-girlfriend. Russia’s Olympic ban followed the uncovering of a doping conspiracy where tainted urine samples were switched with clean ones. The government has denied any

state involvement in the plot but a top sports official Vitaly Mutko, currently a deputy prime minister, was suspended by the IOC for life.

Russia’s reinstatement in the IOC does not affect the suspended status of its RUSADA national anti-doping agency with the World Anti-Doping Agency, which on Monday said the country remains non-compliant, citing “proven systemic manipulation of the doping control process.”

WADA previously criticised the decision by the Court of Arbitration for Sport which overturned Olympic life bans on 28 Russians accused of doping, though they still did not compete in Pyeongchang.

“Unfortunately so far our relationship with WADA, the reinstatement of status of RUSADA, is not complete,” Zhukov said. “There is still a lot of work to be done which is likely to be as difficult as the work to reinstate the Russian Olympic Committee,” he said. “But we must do this as quickly as possible to create a comprehensive system to fight doping in Russia.” — AFP

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We are very relieved

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W Cup coaches brace for ‘modern life’ of VAR

SOCHI: World Cup coaches expressed a quiet confidence yesterday about Video Assistant Referee technology ahead of its likely adoption for this year’s showpiece event in Russia. Representatives from the 32 teams to have qualified for the World Cup gathered in the Black Sea resort of Sochi for a briefing on how “modern life” was taking over the beautiful game.

Video Assistant Referee (VAR) technology is expected to be given the green light by the International Football Association Board (IFAB), when the body that determines the laws of the game meets on Saturday. VAR has been heavily promoted by world football’s governing body FIFA,

despite its implementation this season in leading leagues such as the German Bundesliga and Italy’s Serie A not convincing everyone. Earlier this week, UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said European football’s governing body would not introduce VAR in next season’s Champions League due to ongoing “confusion” surrounding its use. But coaches emerging from the Sochi meeting said they were ready to ring in the changes—even if the system had not ironed out all the kinks. “This is the new life. This is modern life,” said Iran head coach Carlos Queiroz. “It is obvious that football cannot go on with its eyes closed to the modern world.” VAR can only be used when there is doubt surrounding any of four key game-changing situations: after a goal, penalty decisions, after a straight red card or in cases of mistaken identity. Two of the top complaints have involved VAR either being used too often and slowing down the game or—conversely—not being called on in decisive moments. One case in England—where VAR has been trialled in the FA Cup—saw the referee given a different picture from the one shown to confused fans on television.

Some head coaches said Russia will be something of a test case about which it was premature to pass judgement.

“It’s something to improve football, we suppose,” said Uruguay’s assistant coach Celso Otero.

“I think VAR will be approved and then we will evaluate it.” Nigeria coach Gernot Rohr said FIFA’s refereeing department chief Massimo Busacca assured sceptics at yesterday’s meeting that video replays produced fairer outcomes. Busacca said “it was very important for the referee to make less mistakes to have the video assistant,” Rohr told AFP. “VAR is coming to eliminate mistakes by the referee. It’s actually something that makes the game fair,” Saudi Arabia’s assistant coach Manuel Suarez agreed.

England in particular have had famous run-ins with disputed goals at the World Cup. Diego Maradona’s “Hand of God” saw Argentina through in 1986 while Germans are still smarting about a goal that helped England win their only World Cup in 1966.

Some coaches agreed that resorting to replays could result in match interruptions that break up a team’s rhythm and momentum. “It might slow down a little bit the play,” said Egypt assistant coach Jose Fantaguzzi. “But in general, the technology is very important for the time being.” Yet Fantaguzzi also admitted that his squad was a little bit anx-



SOCHI: Switzerland’s national team head coach Vladimir Petkovic speaks to the media after FIFA World Cup 2018 Team Workshop. — AFP

ious about how it will all turn out. “A little bit, but not that much,” Fantaguzzi said with a laugh. “We are just ready to follow the rules and prepare.” — AFP