

A Game of States? Sport and International Politics

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2022 was a momentous year in the history of international sport. Not only was an unprecedented ban on athletes from a traditional sports superpower like Russia introduced in many disciplines and events upon recommendation of the International Olympic Committee, as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine; just a few weeks before, the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing had been boycotted at the diplomatic level by the US Biden administration, followed by some allies, in protest against the hosting country's violation of human rights; and in the next months, the run-up to the men's FIFA World Cup held in Qatar – the first Islamic country to organise the event – was dotted with heightened criticism by Western media and commentators focusing on labour and LGBT rights in the Gulf emirate, with local organisers and scholars retorting that this was all but another manifestation of a colonial attitude towards non-Western countries. While the debate on sporting bans, human rights and mega-events rages on through 2023, terms such as the 'geopolitics of sport', 'sportswashing' and 'soft power' have been widely used (and abused) in the media, while the banner of 'apolitical sport' has been raised once again by many governments and sports organisations in an effort to keep the focus on matches and medals.

The entanglement of international sport with international politics is, as such, nothing new. Since their inception, international sports events have been a unique arena for interaction and competition – not only between states and their representatives, but also between non-state actors from different countries –, thus providing opportunities for diplomacy and détente, as well as soft power projection, great power politics and signalling through sanctions and boycotts. During the Cold War, international sport provided a spectacular platform for symbolic confrontation between the US and the USSR and their respective blocs, but also an avenue for the reintegration of the countries defeated in World War II and the recognition at the international level of the 'new' postcolonial states in Africa and Asia. Non-state actors – including individual athletes – were also able to reclaim the sporting stage to deliver powerful

messages, as embodied in John Carlos and Tommie Smith's iconic gesture at the Mexico 1968 Olympics. After 1989-91, mega-sports events were more than ever seen as the incarnation of a globalized world – and its many contradictions, as sheer commercialization, huge North-South inequalities and the allocation of events to dubious (but cash-rich) regimes highlighted. In parallel, international sports organizations had to increasingly engage with a variety of non-state actors – among them, non-governmental organizations advocating for human rights and multinational corporations eager to capitalise on billions of sports enthusiasts – and new questions – ranging from increasing attention to the environmental and social sustainability of mega-events to anti-discrimination demonstrations and calls for recognition of non-binary gender identities. In recent years, the increasing fragmentation of the international system, also linked to rising China-US tensions, the emergence of identity-obsessed populist movements, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, casts further complexity and uncertainty on international sport, calling for renewed scholarly attention and inquiry.

The nexus between sport and politics has been widely investigated in the fields of history and sociology since the 1970s-1980s, also (but not limited to) in connection with the Cold War confrontation. On the contrary, international relations scholarship has been somehow slower in approaching the topic, perhaps also due to its traditional focus on state actors and the uncertain status of international sport amidst the governmental and non-governmental spheres. Nonetheless, building on pioneering works from the 1990s, a substantial volume of works addressing the nexus between international sport and politics has appeared starting from the 2000s and – even more so – the 2010s. In parallel with the transformation of the discipline of international relations at large, lines of inquiry into international sport have broadened as well: from the analysis of sport as part of states' nation-building, great-power and soft-power strategies to the specific processes, practices and actors of sports diplomacy (and related anti-diplomacy) to the role of international sport organisations as non-governmental actors, the (contested) political economy of mega-events, migration and migrant identities and labour, gender and human rights in international sport.

The aim of this special issue is to build on this burgeoning research to address some of the most salient questions currently at the junction between international sport and politics. The war against Ukraine has surely had a massive impact on international sport: not only due to the aforementioned ban on athletes from Russia and Belarus, but also because of its repercussions on Ukrainian athletes. This latter aspect is discussed in the article by Francesca Romana Lenzi, Ciro Clemente Di Falco and Giuseppe Coppola, which – drawing on research on the wellbeing-performance nexus – compares the performance of Ukrainian and European football players before and after the outbreak of the war. The war has also affected the sporting environment of neighbouring countries, especially those hosting a Russian-speaking minority, such as Latvia. In her article, through a semantic analysis of both Russian- and Latvian-language sources, Anastasjia Ropa highlights the use of sport as a propaganda tool in Latvian media after 24 February 2022, also including the coverage of the debate on Latvian-Russian gymnast Jelizaveta Polstyanaya's citizenship.

How athletes holding dual citizenship may navigate, and even shape, international rivalry is discussed by Veronica Strina and Francesca Vomeri with reference to two American-born sportswomen of Chinese descent, Gu Ailing and Zhu Yi. Building on the literature on sport and national identities, Strina and Vomeri point out how athletes' naturalisation may contribute to the creation of a multicultural nationalism but also lead to a surge of negative sportive nationalism. The political use of sport in China – and its limits – is also analysed in the article by Giovannipaolo Ferrari and Daniele Battista. The authors point out that, despite Xi Jinping's personal commitment to developing Chinese football and substantial investment both at home and abroad in the 2010s, it is currently uncertain whether the political economy of both Chinese football and the PRC's at large will be able to sustain the rise of China as a superpower in football as well.

Looking at interstate relations, the role of football fans vis-à-vis bilateral state diplomacy is examined by Pavol Struhár and Marián Bušša. The article situates the unfolding of the deep-seated rivalry between Slovan Bratislava and Ferencvárosi TC in the context of evolving Slovak-Hungarian relations from 1992 to 2022. While Hungary and Slovakia moved from tense relationship linked to resurgent nationalism in the early 1990s to overall friendly relations in recent years, aggressive nationalism has remained widespread among die-hard fans of the two clubs till today. The role and attitude of football fans identifying with a stateless nation such as Kurdistan is analysed instead by Gabriele Leone and Fabrizio Di Buono. The authors shed light on how, despite state repression, Kurdish football fans have been able to forge transnational ties, creating a space for counterhegemonic dissent and conflict that stretches beyond borders, involving the larger Kurdish diaspora.

Finally, nonlinear and conflicting dynamics surrounding human rights in football are the subject of Yvan Issekin's article. Focusing on the discussion about LGBTIQ+ rights during the 2022 Qatar World Cup, Issekin illuminates how geopolitical dynamics entangle with the human rights discourse, bringing further complexity into the global governance of international sport and its possible reforms – a question that, in light of the increasing fragmentation of the international system, is likely to emerge again and again in connection with mega-events in the future, making the discussion on the nexus of sport and international politics all the more urgent.