
Olympic Games as an Instrument of State Propaganda in Diverse Political Systems and Varied Regional Contexts

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this study is to identify how international sporting events can serve as instruments of propaganda and to explore how different states utilize these events to advance specific political and national interests.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The primary research methods employed in this study include a critical analysis of archival literary and visual sources, as well as contemporary literature. A descriptive narrative analysis was utilized to investigate key cases where sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, influenced bilateral and multilateral relations. The core research techniques applied in the analysis encompass methods of induction, deduction, synthesis, and observational approaches, which underpin the arguments supporting the generalized conclusions.

Findings: The study provided significant insights into the use of sporting events as tools for image-building and political narrative construction, as well as the societal responses to these efforts. It demonstrated that international sporting events serve as an effective instrument for achieving specific political objectives.

Practical Implications: The findings pave the way for a new direction in research on this topic, which, despite its significance and growing interest, remains insufficiently explored.

Originality/Value: Through the synthesis of historical and contemporary sources, this article contributes to the understanding of the manipulative aspects of utilizing the lofty ideals of sports by societies with diverse political systems organizing international events.

Keywords: International relations, international sporting events, propaganda.

JEL codes: F5, L83, M38

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1. Introduction

International sporting events play a significant role in shaping public opinion and promoting a nation or its policies. The organization of such events impacts urban spaces, fostering infrastructure development and creating opportunities for intercultural interaction. This unique form of sports communication also serves as a platform for propaganda, aimed at influencing foreign societies to achieve foreign policy objectives.

Today, the Olympic Games represent the most renowned example of an international sporting event, as evidenced by the number of participants, disciplines, and global viewership. It is worth noting that the concept of organized athletic competition predates even the ancient Olympic Games, which serve as a major inspiration for the modern iteration of the Games.

The idea of reviving the Olympic Games had existed for centuries, with a total of 17 attempts preceding the successful initiative by Baron de Coubertin. The industrialization of 19th-century England, combined with advancements in medicine and pedagogy, redefined sports as a tool for improving public health rather than merely entertainment for the wealthy, as had been the case since the late 17th century. Similar developments occurred in other European countries. Enhancing physical fitness among school students was intended to result in better-trained soldiers, thereby increasing military potential.

The emergence of nation-states was the most critical factor in shaping the modern form of international sporting events (Grima *et al.*, 2018). Traditional games and competitions played a role in fostering shared identity among ethnic minorities and often served as the sole element of cultural heritage that remained unaffected by repression, unlike art, literature, and language.

Propaganda, in its common understanding, refers to deliberate actions aimed at shaping specific views and behaviors within a group or individual. Every state actor on the international stage engages in propaganda, leveraging the appeal of its culture, values, and achievements, including in sports. In the 21st century, with people having easier access to information than ever before, states utilize all modern media channels to conduct propaganda.

These propagandistic messages are not only directed at the domestic population but also at the global community, making propaganda an ideal method for projecting a state's soft power. This approach serves as an alternative to more conventional hard power, which includes military force, sanctions, threats, coercion, or even war (both forms of power are tools of influence and goal achievement, with their combination referred to as smart power).

Positive values associated with a country and its society, fostering favorable

attitudes toward the state, contribute to its image-building. Within the cultural dimension, alongside the perception of a nation's cultural heritage, contemporary art, literature, cinema, and music, "excellence in sports" is also recognized, underscoring the role of sports in shaping a nation's image.

Sporting achievements are often utilized by governments to achieve political objectives. These objectives may include gaining an advantage in international competition or fostering national pride among citizens. Nations frequently identify with their sports teams, and their successes are perceived as collective achievements. This narrative is often adopted by the media, which portrays athletes as embodiments of national pride (Necel, 2009).

Owing to their international popularity and the "halo effect," many athletes become de facto ambassadors for their countries, contributing to the construction of their national image. States engage in international programs for athlete exchanges, joint training sessions, and exhibition matches (Kobierecki, 2018). Occasionally, athletes use their social standing to draw attention to human rights violations, humanitarian crises, or broader injustices (World Economic Forum, 2022; Butterworth, 2022; Barnsley, 2022).

In addition to athletes, sports clubs have also become actors in international relations. Some clubs possess immense popularity and prestige, granting them significantly greater political potential than individual athletes. A notable example is FC Barcelona, often referred to as "the Pride of Catalonia." Its official anthem is considered the second anthem of the region, and its matches are used to emphasize Catalonia's distinct identity (Queenan, 2012). Particularly significant are matches against Real Madrid, a club from Spain's capital, where victories are often perceived as triumphs over an oppressor (Józefczyk, 2009).

When a country does not have a renowned domestic football club to leverage for image-building, it may choose to acquire a club from another nation. Qatar followed this strategy in 2012 by purchasing the French club Paris Saint-Germain. This acquisition, along with multi-million-dollar player transfers, brought Qatar into the global football spotlight (Czulda, 2017).

Owning a prominent football club became a component of Qatar's foreign policy strategy, aimed at fostering or strengthening political and economic relationships. Entering the European market primarily raised awareness among Europeans about the existence of Qatar (other examples of using ownership of high-profile football clubs for image-building include the purchases of Chelsea F.C. and Arsenal F.C. by Russian oligarchs close to Vladimir Putin, Newcastle United by Saudi Arabia, and Manchester City F.C. by Abu Dhabi and China).

The phenomenon whereby countries or state-owned enterprises utilize sports to enhance their reputation is known as sportswashing (Boykoff, 2022). Hosting

international sporting events allows the host nation to craft its image as an attractive and progressive state while simultaneously diverting public attention from the aforementioned social issues or human rights violations.

2. Literature Review

Research on the role of international sporting events as a propaganda tool remains selective in scope, and the volume of such studies is still relatively limited. Among contemporary authors who have published well-documented research in this area through academic articles are predominantly: Alavi, Belcastro, Næss, Akhmetkarimov, Aminova, Grix, Kramareva, Cha, Trunkos, Heere, Lee, Houlihan, Freeman, and Gilboa (Alavi, 2024; Belcastro, 2023; Næss, 2023; Akhmetkarimov and Aminova, 2021; Grix and Kramareva, 2017; Cha, 2016; Trunkos and Heere, 2017; Grix and Lee, 2013; Grix and Houlihan, 2013; Freeman, 2012; Gilboa, 2008).

One of the most significant monographs in the field of studying the relationship between sports and politics is *The History of Sport* by Lipoński (Lipoński, 2012). Although its chronological scope is limited, the book synthesizes the history of sport and humanity's enduring tendency to intertwine it with politics, particularly during the formation of national identities.

Also noteworthy are the works of Kobierecki on the role of sports in politics. His monograph, *Sports Diplomacy: Sport in the Diplomatic Actions of States and Non-State Actors* (Kobierecki, 2018), analyzes various ways in which sports have been utilized in diplomacy, including the role of the Olympic Games as a propaganda tool.

Podleśny's book, *Sports Policy of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation* (Podleśny, 2019), provides an in-depth examination of sports policies pursued over decades in the USSR and Russia. Another essential contribution is the book *Putin's Olympics: The Sochi Games and the Evolution of Twenty-First Century Russia* (Orttung & Zhemukhov, 2017), in which the authors analyze how the Sochi Olympics were designed as a symbol of Russia's return to great power status.

3. Research Methodology

The authors of this study primarily based their research on a comprehensive analysis of thematically selected historical, geographical, political, and sociological literature, as well as publicly available audiovisual records. The main methodological framework integrates methods of induction, deduction, and synthesis, complemented by an observational approach that facilitates the formulation of generalized conclusions. The study predominantly employed descriptive narrative analysis to examine key cases where sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, influenced bilateral and multilateral relations.

4. Research Results

Hosting an international sporting event has become one of the most media-effective means of disseminating state-driven image propaganda. The largest events, such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, garner unparalleled levels of global attention. Estimates indicate that the Tokyo 2021 Summer Olympics attracted 3 billion viewers, while the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar reached an audience of 5.4 billion (IOC, 2020; beIN SPORTS, 2022).

These events not only captivate global television audiences but also draw millions of tourists to the host nations (FIFA, 2022). With such extensive reach, a host nation can effectively promote its culture, economy, history, and values, creating an image of itself as a well-organized country with superior infrastructure and a thriving sporting culture (Miazek, 2019).

The globalization of sports commenced in the interwar period, largely driven by the expanding role of the media. Print journalism, radio broadcasts, and television significantly increased the accessibility of international sporting events. The first televised broadcast occurred during the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics (Lipoński, 2012). During these Games, the documentary *Olympia* was produced, serving as one of many collaborations between Leni Riefenstahl and the Nazi Party.

Riefenstahl had previously directed films depicting Nazi rallies, which were later utilized as propaganda tools (Włodarczyk, 2016). Similarly, *Olympia* achieved success in Europe, and in 1938, Riefenstahl attempted to persuade the American film industry to screen the documentary in U.S. theaters. However, her efforts ultimately failed (Graham, 1993).

The Berlin Summer Olympics represented the first deliberate attempt to use an international sporting event to propagate the ideas and values officially endorsed by the host state (Jakubowski, 2012). This effort proved successful, as the Third Reich demonstrated its organizational and financial capabilities. Visitors also observed the widespread support for Hitler's regime among the German populace. Only those already familiar with the realities of Nazi Germany prior to the Games remained unconvinced by the propaganda.

After a twelve-year hiatus caused by World War II, the Summer Olympics returned in 1948, hosted by London. The British had initially been scheduled to organize the Games in 1944. Known as the "Austerity Games," due to the prevailing post-war policies of rationing and economic frugality, the event emerged as an unexpected success.

To minimize costs, no new sports facilities or athlete villages were constructed; competitors were housed in Royal Air Force camps and schools (Elliott, 2012). Although the International Olympic Committee recommended inviting Germany and

Japan, the British government declined. Despite the lingering impact of the war, Britain successfully organized the Games with expenses amounting to £730,000 and generated a profit of approximately £30,000 (Team GB, 2023). Beyond financial success, the Games lifted the spirits of a population recovering from wartime hardships (Niumata, 2020).

During the Cold War, strained international relations were reflected in sporting rivalries. Both superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—boycotted each other's Olympic Games. The 1980 Moscow Olympics aimed to portray the USSR as a prosperous nation and to showcase the superiority of the communist system over capitalism.

The Games also sought to highlight Soviet lifestyles, peaceful foreign policy, and the achievements of its people. Similar to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the Soviets employed “Potemkin village” tactics, concealing “undesirable elements,” such as dissidents, from foreign visitors. Despite boycotts by Western nations, the Moscow Olympics were deemed a success and were nostalgically remembered in Russia for decades (Kobierecki, 2018).

The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, heavily financed by private sponsors, became more profitable than any prior international sporting event. This generated reputational benefits for the United States and the broader capitalist system during its ideological rivalry with communism. The opening and closing ceremonies positively influenced global perceptions of the United States, emphasizing the appeal of American culture and achievements, including space exploration.

While the Los Angeles Olympics were not a direct government initiative, they received substantial governmental support, particularly to mitigate the effects of boycotts by communist states. U.S. embassies played an active role in ensuring broad international participation in the Games (Kobierecki, 2013).

Hosting an international sporting event also provides a platform for a nation to rebrand itself by showcasing transformations that might otherwise go unnoticed internationally. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics serve as a prime example. These Games marked the first Olympics held on the Asian continent and the first to exclude apartheid-era South Africa. The event projected Japan as a modernized and attractive destination for tourism and investment, distancing itself from the negative associations of World War II.

The Tokyo Summer Olympics were documented in the film *Tokyo Olympiad*, originally intended to be directed by the globally renowned Akira Kurosawa (IOC, 1964a). For the Games, Japan constructed new sports facilities, expanded Tokyo's metro, introduced the world's first high-speed rail line, and restored historical landmarks (Droubie, 2008). Symbolizing Japan's rebirth, the Olympic flame was lit

by Yoshinori Sakaï, a student born on August 6, 1945—the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima (IOC, 1964b).

China also sought to reshape its global image through hosting the Olympics. Following the successful 1990 Asian Games, Beijing presented itself as an open and well-organized nation. After years of effort, it secured the rights to host the Summer Olympics, perceived as an opportunity to unify and enhance its international image. While China was portrayed as a burgeoning economy undergoing social transformation, criticisms arose regarding its environmental degradation and political regime.

China's development depends heavily on international economic cooperation, making it imperative to portray the nation as a reliable partner. Alongside significant infrastructure investments—including over 650 kilometers of expressways, four new metro lines, a new airport terminal, and 37 stadiums in six cities—China implemented eco-friendly initiatives, such as reforestation and reductions in car usage (Kobierecki, 2018).

The opening ceremony highlighted Chinese traditions, culture, and technological advancements. Despite criticisms from international media and NGOs, the Games positioned China as a modern and attractive global player. This success was reinforced by China's willingness to host the Winter Olympics in 2022, making Beijing the first city to host both Summer and Winter Games.

Opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games consistently draw millions of viewers globally. Host nations leverage this platform to present their culture, achievements, and national identity in the most favorable light. The portrayal, however, often idealizes the nation while omitting controversial or less commendable aspects of its history. Such revisionism is not exclusive to authoritarian regimes but also practiced by democratic nations, including Canada and the United Kingdom.

The 2010 Vancouver Olympics' opening ceremony aimed to showcase Canada's rich culture and multicultural identity. A significant highlight involved 345 Indigenous Canadians performing traditional dances in tribal regalia (ITBC, 2010).

However, this portrayal was criticized by some First Nations members. Grand Chief Stewart Philip remarked, "I don't think it's appropriate to stand there hand in hand with government officials and be part of a false representation of our people's prosperity" (Kaste, 2010). Arthur Manuel, another First Nations leader, noted Canada's rejection of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Manuel, 2010).

Colonial histories were also overlooked during the 2012 London Olympics. Directed by Oscar-winning filmmaker Danny Boyle, the ceremony aimed for inclusivity (Rose, 2022). It depicted various phases of British history but omitted references to

imperialism or colonialism, drawing criticism for its selective narrative (Bonde, 2014). Despite this, the ceremony demonstrated Britain's use of soft power, showcasing its contributions to global culture while celebrating its achievements.

The Conservative Party's right-wing politicians voiced criticism regarding the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony (BBC, 2012). However, their critique was not directed at the omission of how Britain accumulated its wealth and attained its global position but rather at the perceived overemphasis on multiculturalism. To deliver the most positive narrative of the nation's history during the opening ceremony, no mention was made of colonialism or imperialism.

The British Olympics continued the tradition of employing the opening ceremony as a tool of soft power, highlighting the nation's contributions to contemporary culture and celebrating its achievements while avoiding the more contentious aspects of its past.

The opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics represented a departure from that of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. This time, there was no effort to promote a distinct political or economic system. Instead, Russia sought to project itself as a modern state and a reliable partner on the international stage. Similar to 34 years prior, the Sochi ceremony showcased Russia's rich cultural heritage and historical legacy, yet without the ideological framing.

This shift reflected the profound changes in the international landscape over the intervening decades. The Cold War had ended, and Russia aimed to position itself as part of the global system rather than as an opposing bloc. Nonetheless, the sporting events were still used to achieve exceptional results and demonstrate the nation's strength.

The case of the Sochi Winter Olympics, however, stands out due to their record-breaking costs, the scale of corruption associated with them, and the personal involvement of the head of state. Vladimir Putin treated the Games as his personal project. For the Russian authorities, the success of Sochi symbolized their own victory, which they sought to translate into political capital both domestically and internationally.

However, the decision to invade sovereign Ukraine nullified any potential positive international outcomes from Sochi. Domestically, much of Russian society accepted the propagandistic messaging and viewed the Games as a positive promotion of their country. This acceptance was partly driven by nostalgia for the glory days of the Soviet Union's legendary sports achievements. Nevertheless, critical voices within Russia highlighted instances of manipulation. Unfortunately, these voices were few, and it remains unclear whether this was because the majority of Russians genuinely viewed the Games positively or due to the high levels of state control and fear of repercussions.

International sanctions imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea excluded both Russia and Belarus from full membership in international sports organizations. As a result, athletes from these countries were barred from participating in international tournaments and sporting events. Additionally, Russia and Belarus were stripped of their rights to host previously scheduled sporting events.

Another dimension of sports sanctions involved the termination or suspension of numerous sponsorship agreements between Russian state-owned and private enterprises and various sports entities, including clubs and federations. Consequently, Russia was no longer able to invest in international sports, ending years of effective activity in this domain.

The global community had recognized the critical role that sports played in the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus, which for years had been used to bolster Russia's international image and solidify domestic support. The sanctions compelled Russia to revise its narrative and propaganda strategies. There were instances where Russian athletes publicly expressed support for the "special military operation," but only a few faced penalties from their respective sports organizations (Shefferd, 2022).

In Russia, propaganda is as integral and expansive as its military operations, with elite athletes serving as instrumental figures in strengthening the state's image. The historical example of South Africa, which was excluded from international sports structures for decades due to apartheid, demonstrates the effectiveness of sports sanctions (Booth, 2003). It is crucial that pressure be maintained and that countries and international sports organizations avoid prematurely lifting the sanctions imposed on Russia.

5. Conclusion

Sport has been intertwined with politics since its inception, and this connection is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. This study analyzes the role of international sporting events as tools of propaganda, using selected Olympic Games as case studies. The research yielded significant insights into how these Games were utilized to construct political narratives and build national images, as well as the societal responses to such efforts.

It demonstrated that international sporting events are an effective means of achieving specific political objectives. Other nations that hosted previous Olympic Games similarly capitalized on the global attention to promote their political and national interests. Russia, too, leveraged its Games to strengthen its international position and present itself as a modern, dynamic state. Various propaganda strategies were employed, including information control, manipulation of media narratives, and the creation of a favorable image of the host.

Cultural elements that Russia took pride in were highlighted, while those it preferred to forget were omitted. This approach was not unique; Russia's predecessors employed similar tactics.

Sports are highly media-driven spectacles and extremely lucrative, making them convenient vehicles for advancing political narratives and building national brands. In recent years, this phenomenon has become particularly evident among countries with low levels of civil liberties. While Russia and Belarus have been temporarily barred from using sports as tools of international propaganda, other authoritarian regimes continue to have access to this strategy.

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