

UDC 327.3+061.2

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30970/PPS.2024.55.48>

OLYMPIC GAMES AS A TOOL OF UKRAINIAN DIPLOMACY DURING WARTIME

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Sports sphere and the Olympics in particular are turning into an effective tool in the hands of political actors. Sports diplomacy, therefore, emerges as a subtle yet potent means of advancing national interests on the global stage, influencing both public perception and policy decisions. By leveraging the universal appeal of sports, countries can foster dialogue, bridge divides, and enhance their soft power in ways that traditional diplomacy often cannot. This means that the modern actors of international relations, whose number and range of functions and influence is only growing, can freely and effectively use different formats, different budgets and different scales of sport tools, which can lead not only to the strengthening of these actors, but also to a change in the balance of power, to push to peace negotiations or, on the contrary, to rally allies in a face of a conflict situation. At the same time, it is worth clearly evaluating such methods, which in the hands of subjects of international relations are weakly capable of critically reversing the course of the situation or bringing multimillion-dollar profits and stable flows of foreign tourists and investments. However, the Olympics can definitely play the role of a catalyst or attract mediator, which, thanks to its comprehensibility and accessibility to a wide and completely different audience, really leads, albeit not directly, to transformations in the political and social life of current states and other actors of international relations. It turns out that the Olympics is an effective and "painless" method of solving problematic issues and promoting desired interests in general, as we can see from Ukraine's practice of such methods during the 2024 Olympics – from the protocol of behavior of Ukrainian athletes towards Russians and Belarusians at competitions, communication recommendations in general, as well as the formation of images and symbols for the Olympics, which became a tool in media-based international politics. And the mentioned actions were pretty successful for the Ukrainian side as one of the most important factors of the aggressors' oppression was formed – their isolation from the rest of the world as well as demolishing of their athletes' sense of the statehood. The paper looks deeply into the last Summer Olympic Games in Paris as it turned out to be the focal point in the Ukrainian sports diplomacy.

Key words: sports diplomacy, public diplomacy, soft power, Olympic Games, politicization of sports.

I don't respect you. I have an obsession with power.

I want to take what's yours and never give it back.

What's mine is mine and what's yours is mine.

Nike ad campaign "Winning isn't for everyone"
for the Summer Olympics in Paris 2024

Introduction. First of all, we should understand the basis of the connection between politics and sports and why sports is the perfect ground for the political activities. The authors perceive the political sphere as a battleground of interests and constant power struggles, where cooperation is merely a tactical approach to achieving a political actor's selfish goals whereas military

affairs and sports also fall within this realm, which is why these phenomena are viewed through a common lens – the concept of agon. Agon, being rooted in ancient Greek culture, represents the pursuit of conflict, competition, and confrontation, embodying the quest for superiority and the struggle for glory in competitive scenarios [1, p. 31]. This spirit of agon is marked by intense competition, individualism, and the drive for victory, evident in activities like sports contests, hunting, duelling, and warfare [1, p. 31]. In sports, the presence of an opponent is essential, making the outcome clear-cut for both sides – either victory or defeat. Thus, it aligns with the notion of agon as an aspect of human nature, simultaneously tempering or fulfilling the innate human craving for power.

However, despite the clear trait of the sports to maintain the war-like spirit and behaviour, the associative function of it and Olympics in particular can be aimed at creation and cooperation as well. Sport here even approaches the art sphere with its strong aesthetics of the human body and its power, as well as a certain social glue that unites cultures, urban spaces and sometimes even overcomes stereotypes and history. Everyone likes to be associated with winners, everyone wants to show their character through the power of an athlete, and for the state as a unit, which presents itself as a "living" being – this is very beneficial due to the ease of involvement of the sports ecosystem and athletes in particular. The latter is explained by the fact that the same influence through mass culture would be perceived as propaganda, when sports are easier to conquer, even without excessive social condemnation, because the athlete serves for the benefit of the people and the state, while having to represent the anthem, flag and national colors with dignity.

Sports as a tool in current international politics

It's the accessible and open features of the modern politics that bring sports into the effective set of tools of actors' impact. The authors consider such politics to be the media-based international one – it is such a state of modern inter-actor political relations, which is based on the large-scale and regular symbols' and narratives' creation by subjects and their sharing by objects in social networks and online media. In the 1960s the opinion that "we live in a world of signs and symbols every day" was already established [2, p. 198], however, this situation has become the norm for the development of international relations only during the last decades, which forces us to pay great attention to the mentioned type of political interactions in general. It was in the first decades of the 21st century that the sphere of information began to spread around all areas of activities of both an individual and the state, which is why today knowledge is becoming a power on a global scale, and more and more people have access to information than ever before in history [3, p. 10]. Here are the following focal points of such international politics that allow sports being effectively used through it:

1. An extremely wide circle of actors – it is not only about the state and other governmental representations of the country, but also about grassroots initiatives (public organizations, local communities, social movements, etc.) and individual even non-political personalities who easily represent international interests and gain the soft power to one's own people / country / social circle. This fact allows sports ecosystem's actors (athletes, teams, sports establishment and others) easily get involved in real actions on a world stage;

2. Although we are discussing the political nature of these interactions, such vested motives are not always directly communicated. Instead, they are often presented under the guise of cultural, sports, or educational initiatives, which subtly draw the audience into a broader social and political agenda;

3. Such a tool can work only in open governments and communities as among non-democratic political forces, "soft" tools will automatically get distorted or turned into the hybrid forms of soft power;

4. Proximity to the audience – various actors speak a language that is understandable to each other on known platforms and with similar values. This is also about a high level of adaptability as social objects and their moods are constantly transforming, the content and details must also move in time with the object of interaction;

5. Inhabiting space through associative symbols and signs, or by superimposing symbolic space onto physical space, usually involves the use of symbols rather than physical objects [4, p. 401].

Thus, sports and sports actors easily turn into politically engaged units, which, on the one hand, leads to the achievement of certain tasks of the socio-political agenda, e.g. builds bridges between nations, promotes peace, or advances a country's political agenda on the global stage, and on the other, "spoils" sports with other impurities that do not relate to the sphere, turning them into only a tool for achieving other actors' goals.

The scale and publicity associated with sports make them highly effective political tools. This is evident from the viewership figures for the Winter and Summer Olympic Games between 2012 and 2024, which totalled 31.2 billion views globally across online platforms and television [5]. Athletes, in particular, garner significant attention – two of the top three public figures with a combined social media following of over 700 million are athletes (footballers Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi) [6]. In the lead-up to the Summer Olympics, athletes dominated the covers of major international cultural publications, such as *Elle* (featuring tennis player Iga Swiatek), *Marie Claire* (featuring basketball player A'ja Wilson), *Vanity Fair* (featuring gymnast Simone Biles), and *Vogue* (featuring sprinter Sha'Carri Richardson). Given that sports have the power to shape the opinions of millions of spectators, fans, and athletes, they become a highly accessible and influential tool for various actors.

Sports serve as an effective space for indirect engagement through symbols and narratives. The competitive nature of the Olympics, rooted in the concept of *agon*, provides nations with a platform to showcase their strength and influence. This drive for superiority reflects the political strategies employed by states on the global stage. Understanding this connection allows us to better analyze how countries use the Olympics not just for athletic achievements, but to advance their political agendas—whether through protest gestures on the podium (e.g., 1968 Olympics, American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos), support for minorities (e.g., 2014 Olympics, Dutch snowboarder Cheryl Maas), or demonstrations of citizenship (e.g., 2024 Olympics, Ukrainian canoeist Anastasiia Rybachok). Teams are often seen as representatives of their countries, with athletes' victories symbolizing national achievements, and rivalries reflecting historical struggles between communities. It is no coincidence that one of the first actions performed by an Olympic winner is the display of their national flag. In fact, barring athletes from publicly using national symbols is considered one of the harshest sanctions in the Olympics.

Russian war against Ukraine through Olympics 2024

In this context, we turn to the practical analysis of the Olympics as a political tool, specifically in relation to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. The Ukrainian government, according to an official but not publicly released campaign document, has identified the Paris 2024 Olympics as a crucial platform for conveying specific political messages to the world. This document, from the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine, emphasizes the use of Ukrainian athletes to project Ukraine's steadfast political position, as articulated by President Volodymyr Zelensky, that ending the war can only be achieved through a firm stance against Russian aggression. Additionally, Ukrainian athletes are encouraged to highlight the broader threat to European security posed by Russian aggression, stressing the importance of continued military and financial support

for Ukraine. The success of this communication campaign is measured by Ukraine's ability to secure these resources during the international event.

Notably, Ukraine's sports diplomacy has already seen success in the lead-up to the 2024 Olympics. For the first time since the war began in 2014, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has responded effectively to Ukraine's demands, banning the use of national symbols by Russia and Belarus and imposing strict selection criteria for neutral athletes from these countries, including requirements that they do not support the war or have ties to military units [7]. Additionally, no official political figures from Russia or Belarus were invited to Paris for the Games [7]. This exclusion underscores how sports isolation, often driven by political and diplomatic motives, can be a powerful tool in pressuring governments by depriving them of the legitimacy and "normalcy" that international sports participation confers. Such isolation not only impacts sports but also hinders the broader development of a country's soft power and global image.

Ukrainian athletes have continued to use symbolic gestures, such as dedicating their performances to war victims, which have resonated with international audiences. The Ukrainian delegation successfully advocated for moments of silence during the Games to honor those affected by the conflict, further drawing attention to their cause. One of the high-profile initiatives during the Paris Olympics was the "Athletes for Peace" campaign, where Ukrainian athletes and their international supporters used social media and press conferences to highlight the ongoing conflict. As Ukrainian Olympic champion Zhan Beleniuk stated, "There should be Ukrainians at the competitions who will talk about what Russia is doing in Ukraine, how it kills civilians, how many athletes have died, and how much sports infrastructure has been destroyed. The neutral status of Russian athletes is fake, and we have to do a lot of diplomatic work directly at the Olympic Games" [8]. These efforts were strategically timed to coincide with the heightened media attention surrounding the Olympics, ensuring Ukraine's situation remained in the global spotlight. It is clear that Ukraine is leveraging this year's Olympics to achieve its political goals through the soft power of its athletes.

Before the outbreak of the full-scale war in 2022, Putin used the Olympics and athletes to "sports-wash" Russia's reputation. This term refers to attempts by the leadership of a country with an ambiguous or negative international status – often due to human rights violations or other local and international crimes – to improve its global image. By hosting large-scale events like the Olympics, such leaders aim to divert attention from internal or external troubles and present a carefully crafted image that counters negative stereotypes. Both Nazi Germany and Putin's Russia hosted the Olympics while preparing for or actively engaging in wars. Paradoxically, despite the aggressive intentions of these regimes, they were allowed to host these prestigious events, which likely emboldened their aggressive plans rather than curbing them. Sports-washing, in this context, undermines the true values of sportsmanship and competition, turning them into tools for achieving goals that contradict these very principles [9].

As for the 2024 Summer Olympics, the reaction of Putin and the Russians was predictable, but not very active. It was more about resentment and reconciliation with the position of exiles from the world community [7]. The IOC banned any manifestations of nationality for Russians and Belarusians – neither the anthem, nor the colors, nor the name, nor anything else could be present among those athletes who were selected to participate in the mentioned Olympics [7]. Russians and Belarusians seem to have been deprived of any statehood which is one of the worst sanctions for athletes, because it deprives them of a moment of respect, dedication to achievements and sharing emotions with "theirs" in contrast to "others". They seem to have no one to publicly compete for, because the object of perception of such a collective victory – the country and the community – has been taken away from them. Despite the IOC's long-standing intention to minimize nationalistic displays at the Olympics, the first action taken by most Olympic

winners is to proudly display their country's flag. Therefore, the sanctions against Russia and Belarus not only reinforce their international isolation but also serve as a powerful statement against those who initiate armed aggression against the global order.

Looking ahead, the strategies employed by Ukraine during the 2024 Paris Olympics could set a precedent for how nations use international sports events to further their political agendas. Other countries facing conflicts or seeking to assert their global influence might adopt similar tactics, leveraging the global visibility of the Olympics to sway international opinion. This trend could lead to increased politicization of sports, where the Olympic Games become a battleground for ideological and geopolitical struggles. In the long term, this shift might challenge the traditional view of the Olympics as a neutral ground, potentially altering how these events are organized and perceived on the world stage.

Conclusion. No other sphere, except perhaps architecture, which spatially embodies power, conveys the aspiration, pleasure, and risks of losing power as effectively as politics and athletics. From the French philosopher Michel Foucault to Brazilian FIFA president João Havelange and American sports giant Nike's campaigns, power is shown to be central to human existence. While politics is inherently complex, sport provides a more tangible example of this dynamic – in competition, there is only one winner, and athletes are divided into two camps. In the eyes of their opponents, athletes are not just competitors but are also defined by their nationality, gender, ethnicity, social affiliation, and other constructs that shape their identities. Therefore, sport cannot be separated from politics and social issues – as soon as a person engages in sports, it inherently acquires broader meanings of a social or political nature. This transformation turns sport into a powerful tool for political actors, especially through the media, which shapes global politics by influencing public opinion and dynamics. Top athletes have become modern celebrities and influencers with vast global audiences, while sports teams attract investors, billionaires, and those looking to sports-wash their reputations. With this impact and fame, sports figures easily step into the realm of media-based politics, using the platform to advance national interests, manage international relations, and engage in strategic communication. This is why various actors use sports to strengthen their positions, shift power balances, and rally allies, as seen in the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and its sports diplomacy.

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ОЛІМПІЙСЬКІ ІГРИ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ СПОРТИВНОЇ ДИПЛОМАТІЇ УКРАЇНИ ПІД ЧАС ВІЙНИ

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Спортивна сфера і Олімпіада зокрема перетворюються на ефективний інструмент у руках політичних гравців. Таким чином, спортивна дипломатія стає непрямим, але потужним засобом просування національних інтересів на світовій арені, впливаючи як на громадську думку, так і на політичні рішення. Використовуючи універсальну привабливість спорту, країни можуть сприяти діалогу, долати розбіжності та посилювати свою «м'яку силу» у спосіб, який часто не під силу традиційній дипломатії. Це означає, що сучасні суб'єкти міжнародних відносин, кількість і спектр функцій і впливу яких лише зростає, можуть вільно та ефективно використовувати різні формати, бюджети та масштаби спортивних інструментів, що може призвести не лише до посилення цих акторів, а й до зміни балансу сил, щоб підштовхнути до мирних переговорів або, навпаки, згуртувати союзників у конфліктній ситуації. Водночас варто чітко оцінити такі методи, які в руках суб'єктів міжнародних відносин не здатні критично переламати хід ситуації чи принести багатомільйонні прибутки та стабільні потоки іноземних туристів та інвестицій. Проте Олімпіада однозначно може відіграти роль каталізатора змін завдяки своїй зрозумілості та доступності для широкої та абсолютно різної аудиторії призводить хоч і не безпосередньо, до трансформацій у політичному та суспільному житті суб'єктів міжнародних відносин. Виходить, що Олімпіада – ефективний і «безболісний» спосіб вирішення проблемних питань і просування бажаних інтересів загалом, про що ми бачимо з прикладу України на Олімпіаді 2024 в Парижі – починаючи з протоколу поведінки українських спортсменів щодо росіян і білорусів на змаганнях, комунікаційних рекомендацій і до формування образів і символів Олімпіади, яка стала ефективним інструментом у медіа залежній міжнародній політиці. І ці дії були досить успішними для української сторони, оскільки було сформовано один з найважливіших чинників опосередкованого стримання агресорів – їх ізоляція від решти світу, а також розмиття відчуття державності їх атлетів. Стаття детально розглядає останні літні Олімпійські ігри в Парижі, які виявилися центром української спортивної дипломатії.

Ключові слова: спортивна дипломатія, публічна дипломатія, м'яка сила, Олімпійські ігри, політизація спорту.