

THE SPORT: AN EUROPEAN UNION'S NEW SOFT POWER TOOL³

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ABSTRACT

Since the twentieth century, sports have developed based on their “eternal values,” as set forth by Pierre de Coubertin; these values have been transmitted by the Olympic Games and have gradually become institutionalized worldwide. By being included in programs such as Europe’s Erasmus student exchange or projects with non-member states, “sports diplomacy” has acquired a dimension that is social, cultural, political, and even “linguistic,” both within and outside the EU. This has made it a pillar of public diplomacy that relies on neither propaganda nor any overt governmental influence.

Keywords: sports, diplomacy, values, integration

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Sport in Europe has developed, especially since the 20th century, from the “eternal values of sport” of Count Pierre de Coubertin, disseminated through the Olympic Games and within the framework of a progressive institutionalization of sport in world society. Its development in the cultures and nations of the world remains rather dichotomous: in the dominant discourse relayed by the media and official speeches, sport is clearly perceived as necessarily “good” because it is the bearer of rules, virtue, respect for others as well as for oneself, but also as a form of regulation of human affects and behaviors. From this point of view, sport is marked by timeless ethics (Bodin *et al.*, 2011).

The role of sport in international relations has been highlighted by Joseph Nye in his approach to soft power, particularly in the context of a so-called “popular” culture and wide dissemination within the media (2004). Sport, or “sport diplomacy,” is one of the components of influence on public opinion worldwide and, therefore a pillar of public diplomacy, without recourse to propaganda or overt government influence.

Sport and social, cultural, and political dialogue in the European Union

According to a Eurobarometer survey, more than 40% of Europeans participate in sports on a weekly basis (Vale & Lastennet, 2021). Thus, over the years, awareness of sport has increased in the European Union, not only as a factor that can have an economic impact but also as a tool for social inclusion, fighting discrimination, xenophobia, and building a sense of belonging (Tomaselli, 2019). The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 already highlighted the social importance of sport and its impact on European identity (European Commission, 1999). The following year, a working document recognized the five functions of sport: educational, health, social, cultural, and recreational. The Helsinki Declaration of 1999 confirmed the EU’s interest in sports by calling for the recognition and strengthening of the educational and social functions of sports. The 2000 European Council in Nice declaration on the specificities of sport and its social functions in Europe is no exception (Grassroots Sport Diplomacy, 2019). All subsequent initiatives and efforts to recognize sport and its role contributed to the adoption of the *White Paper on Sport* in 2007, which was the first comprehensive policy initiative to address sport at the European level, to develop the European dimension of sport, cooperation and dialogue in this area (European Commission, 2011).

The entry into force of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) in 2009 is an important step in the process of institutionalizing the role of sport in the EU. Article 165 of the TFEU provides the power to support, coordinate and complement national sport-related strategies and provides the legal basis for a program dedicated to the financing of sport and the development of its European dimension. Moreover, it also links sport to other policy areas, such as education, health, and youth, but also the promotion of social inclusion of minorities, social ties, and the ideals of peace, solidarity, tolerance, and justice. Furthermore, this article also recognizes the role of sport in the EU's external relations, which is in line with the recommendations of the 2007 *White Paper on Sport* (Garamvölgyi, 2016). The EU has thus clearly identified sport as a means that can be mobilized for its foreign policy and diplomacy to promote, disseminate, and share values, internally in relation to European identification but also externally.

The first retrospective reference to the use of EU sports diplomacy is the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding between the European Commission and the International Football Federation (FIFA), which aims to use soccer as a means of development in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. This initiative highlighted the potential for the EU to use sports to pursue foreign policy objectives (Parrish *et al.*, 2021). Another milestone: in 2014, the Specialized Unit of the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture achieved significant success in terms of improving the status and funding of sport with its inclusion in the EU's Erasmus+ program.

An important moment in the field of EU sports diplomacy was the creation of the High-Level Group on Sport Diplomacy in 2015, whose main task was to identify the value of sport in EU foreign policy and public diplomacy. In its final report, this group states that sport has the potential to become, in particular, a new tool to improve foreign policy and international relations, to reach external audiences more effectively, or to facilitate change and dynamism in diplomatic practices. The final report also mentions the use of sport in public and cultural diplomacy and emphasizes that sports should be part of dialogue and cooperation with third countries (Grassroots Sport Diplomacy, 2019).

The direct inclusion of sport in the Erasmus+ program is a good testament to the fact that sport is currently at the same level of priority for the EU as other policy areas (in previous programming periods, an "Erasmus+ Sport" category was created for sport). The Erasmus+ budget for the 2021-2027 programming period amounts to €26.2 billion, almost double compared to the previ-

ous period (European Commission, 2022), and the budget dedicated to sports activities also increases every year, rising to €51.89M in 2022, compared to €41.7M in 2021 (EOC EU Office, 2021). This evidence suggests that sport and its funding lead to meaningful social, cultural, and political dialogue not only between actors in EU member states but also with actors in the EU's external environment. The organization of sports projects promotes good governance in sports, the European sports model, and other principles, ideals and values fundamental to the EU. Moreover, from 2023 onwards, a new activity in the field of sport, the promotion of mobility, should even be introduced: sports organizations will be able to send their coaches, referees, and staff members to exchange experiences and establish closer cooperation with different partners (European Commission, 2021).

Sport: an EU language for non-member States

The reference to the concept of “sports diplomacy” in the current European Commission’s statement of priorities is confirmed by the statement of the current European Commissioner for Sport, Mariya Gabriel, who considers that “*sport contributes to increased employment opportunities and a better understanding of issues related to peace migration, mobility, and security,*” but also social development, the promotion of key EU interests such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights, and its values in the form of team spirit, solidarity and gender equality (Gabriel, 2020, p. 5).

It is also evident from the recommendations of the 2016 High-Level Group on Sport Diplomacy that the EU uses the added value of sport to establish and deepen partnerships with third countries. In addition to EU member states, non-EU countries can also participate in the Erasmus+ program in the form of a partnership (except for the following countries that are considered participating countries in the program: Northern Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Turkey, and Serbia, see European Commission, 2021). Partner countries “*may participate in certain actions of the program, subject to specific conditions or criteria [... respecting] all restrictions imposed by the European Council on EU external assistance [...], the general values of the EU concerning respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for Human Rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities*” (European Commission, 2021, p. 35). These conditions, therefore, condition the admissibility of projects linking non-EU and EU Member States in the

field of sport. Out of a total number of 651 sport-related projects funded in the 2014-2020 programming period, 192 projects include the participation of third-country organizations, which is almost one-third of the total number of sport-related projects.

Table №1 shows the important position of Turkish organizations in terms of coordination of European projects. The EU Member States bordering the partner countries are not more involved, in proportion to their population than the non-bordering Member States (such as Germany, France, or the United Kingdom). The involvement of sports organizations, especially non-governmental ones, from the entire European area (in the sense of the Council of Europe) can therefore be observed independently of direct neighborhood relations.

Table №1. Nationalities of coordinating organizations, Erasmus+ Sport, 2014-2020

Country	Number of projects
Turkey	50
Germany	17
France	14
Spain	10
Romania	8
United-Kingdom	7
Poland	6
Malta	6
Greece	6
Bulgaria	6
Sweden	5
Serbia	5
Latvia	5
Croatia	5

Source: <https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/grants/2014-2020/erasmus_fr>.

The European Commission has highlighted two initiatives as “good practices”: a mobility project coordinated by a French organization (Project “Séjour multi-national Voilier FRATI”) which integrated discussions on democracy, European citizenship, social inclusion, and equality in (and through) sport, and a project coordinated by a Greek organization, focused on cultural dialogue, intergenerational education and the fight against racism and discrimination in sport (Project

“Balkan (re)vision”). Sport is thus clearly identified, in the convergence between European countries, as an indisputable vector of European values.

Another element illustrates the important role of sport in establishing and deepening social, cultural, and political dialogue: the progressive establishment of references to sport in international agreements between the EU and third countries. Such references can be found, for example, in international agreements with Armenia, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Lebanon, Moldova and Ukraine (Source: <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html>>). These are generally contractual commitments by both parties to promote and deepen cooperation in the field of sport and physical activity, for example, through the exchange of best information and practices and the promotion of the social and educational values of sport. Compliance with these provisions often refers to the use of existing frameworks for funding and cooperation in the field of sport. Examples can be found in the case of the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Program (TAIEX), including expert missions and study visits to share best practices with Georgia in 2016, 2018, and 2019 to assist in the development of a local sports strategy and action plan, or a 2020 expert mission to share European best practices in sports, cultural and artistic activities for people with disabilities with the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Egypt and similar initiatives at the transnational cooperation level with non-member countries such as Albania, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, Montenegro or Serbia (TAIEX Search, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Cooperation in the field of sport is developing at the level of the EU and non-member states to deepen social, cultural, and political dialogue. Sport is undoubtedly an important means for the European Union to conduct a dialogue with non-member countries and cultures to strengthen ties and partnerships, targeting a broad audience.

Globally, the EU relies on the initiatives of non-governmental organizations (Oustinoff, Ruiz; 2022) and their willingness to cooperate with their European environment. However, the implementation and evaluation of EU-funded projects is bureaucratic and likely to discourage applicants, especially after an initial failure, and provides little incentive for applicants to re-submit projects. This situation can lead to the evolution of certain sports organizations towards a specialization for European projects and to the development of a self-censorship for others, which will perhaps continue their initiatives, in particular in cross-border areas, but in an autonomous way.

The Europe of sport exists in practices as well as in the media, and it is obviously interesting, politically, to consider enhancing this European convergence and to engage sports organizations in the construction of Europe through this “language of sport,” which can become actors of European public diplomacy, inside and outside the EU. A project that remains to be developed.

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