

SIGNIFICANCE OF SPORT IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the role of sport and sports diplomacy play in international communication and in international relations. They are helpful in developing international cooperation and promoting foreign policy. Authors aim at explaining why sport represents a significant means of international understanding and the tool for promoting economic cooperation.

KEYWORDS: *international relations, sport, sports diplomacy, international sporting events, policy-making processes*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of sport does not represent only certain physical activity, it also contributes to healthy lifestyle and helps to prevent diseases occurring in modern society. Furthermore, it is an educational tool which helps to build team spirit and contributes to socializing and bringing people together. Add to that, through the presentation of sports values of solidarity and peace, it contributes to political balance and stability in the world. It might be considered an effective means of achieving development and international cooperation.

Political and cultural dimensions of sport are generally recognized and contribute to the development of international relations. The dynamic character of sport has a significant impact on mutual relations among states. Sport plays an important role not only at national but also at international level, it contributes to a greater involvement of national sports organizations in the policy-making processes.

SPORT IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

International relations focus on social phenomena within the international system. These relations are regulated through a set of standards and rules that govern subsequent relations between states. In diplomacy, we also come across so-called sports diplomacy, which is a special field of general political and economic diplomacy. Sports diplomacy and its instruments significantly contribute to the development of political and economic diplomacy worldwide. Furthermore, sport provides space for promoting interests of the country in the international sports community.

Athletes with systematic long term preparation and professional approach to a particular kind of sport gradually achieve better results. The higher an athlete's performance is, the greater is the wish to present not only himself/herself at the national level, but also to represent his/her country at various international events. It follows that sport has an international dimension and top athletes who participate in sports teams in foreign countries are considered to be ambassadors and promoters of certain ideas. Sport helps to develop friendly relations among countries and deepens mutual cooperation and solidarity in economic and political issues as well (Terem, 2013). Convincing evidence that states are nowadays more interested in sports diplomacy is an increasing number of countries associated in various international sports federations and sports organizations.

Political and cultural dimensions of sport are generally recognized and contribute to the development of international relations. Dynamism in the approach to sport has an impact on the development of relations between states. According to Frantisek Chmelar (2013) discussions about globalization and stronger position of non-governmental organisations in the political system are closely related to the area of international sport.

The relationship between sport and politics is central topic in several academic articles and studies nowadays. According to their authors (Beacom, 2000; Dovalil, 2004; Ehl, 2001; Štulajter et al., 2013; Zintz, 2013) sport is a useful instrument through which political goals can be accomplished. Aaron Beacom (2000: 3–4) considers sport to be a political tool and claims that modern sports movement may be ideologically affected. According to the general view, the international sport needs a support from politicians, but they should not interfere with sport ideologically. On the other hand, politicians should realize that sport is slightly political by nature, and they should be able to benefit from it. (Beacom, 2000) An illustrating example of using sport in politics is the case of an Italian politician Silvio Berlusconi, the founder of Forza Italia political party and the owner of AC Milan football club, who benefited from sport in his pre-election campaign.

SPORTS DIPLOMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The fact that sport plays an important role at national as well as international level contributes to a greater involvement of national sport organizations in the policy-making processes. At present, these organizations are actively involved in international politics. Sports organizations closely cooperate with specialized UN agencies, or international governmental and non-governmental organizations in order to use sport as a tool for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. For example, Zintz (2013) states that the International Olympic Committee in cooperation with the United Nations and its specialized agencies develops various projects aimed at the development of sport and physical activities among young people. For instance, in 2010 the International Olympic Committee implemented a project titled “Sport for Hope” which has been realized in a co-operation with the National Olympic Committee of Zambia, the government of Zambia, as well as other international and national sports federations. Its main objective is to provide athletes with comprehensive education and medical care. Authors of this project are planning to spread this idea in other social areas. Within the framework of the project, a new modern sports centre was opened in Haiti in 2014.

In a co-operation with the World Food Programme, the International Olympic Committee is involved in supporting the development of food programs aimed at providing quality food for school children and promoting the development of children's physical activities. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) searches for peaceful settlement of disputes, especially in those areas where the crime rate is relatively high. IOC member states support the efforts of the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat) and try to ensure young people that through sport it is possible to gain confidence and persuasion that they play an important role in contemporary society (Factsheet development..., 2013).

Another example of a significant role of sport in society is connected with our mutual cooperation in the fight against the spread of HIV and AIDS – serious threats for global population. Sport and physical education may be effective in the fight against these viruses and diseases, as well as in the field of education and prevention related to it. Some studies suggest that physical activity can slow down the disease symptoms in those individuals who are HIV positive. Numerous sports programs aim at raising awareness on prevention from further spreading of HIV or other transferable diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. All the above mentioned efforts use sport as a didactic tool in education of children (Tackling HIV/AIDS..., 2014).

When considering the relationship between sport and diplomacy, we come across the question, whether diplomacy helps to sport, or whether sport is beneficial for diplomacy. History showed that through sport certain political attitudes can be declared, for example in the case of bloody water polo match between USSR and Hungary during the Olympics in 1956 in Melbourne, the “*Black Power*” during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico; or “*the Kozakiewicz's gesture*” during the Olympics in 1980 in Moscow. Manifestations of significant intervention of politics in sport boycotts of the Olympic games in the years 1976, 1980 and 1984. Recent Winter Olympic Games in 2014 in Sochi were also affected by the crisis which arose between Russia and Ukraine. However, in fact no manifestations of boycott from the side of Russian or Ukrainian athletes have been recorded.

Another example of a positive role of sports diplomacy is the Olympic Games in Sydney in the year 2000, and Olympics in Athens in 2004, when during the opening ceremony athletes of South and North Korea marched under one flag. Although diplomatic efforts continued in Olympics in Beijing in 2008, IOC failed to negotiate similar manifestation of mutual understanding and peace as in 2000 and 2004.

UN officials highlighted the importance of the Olympic movement in the implementation of the interests of the UN and the Millennium Development Goals. For them, sport is “generally recognized and inexpensive means of achieving humanitarian and development goals”. The European Union is also of an opinion that it necessary to safeguard the cooperation between bodies responsible for sports. Add to that, the EU points out the need to develop relations with third countries and international sports organizations. However, this raises a question whether the sports diplomacy is not about lobbying. We want to clarify that there is a significant difference between sports diplomacy and lobbying. While lobbying aims at achieving specific, short-term goals, sports diplomacy aims at long-term and stable cooperation between states and sports organizations. Here the role of athletes as ambassadors of their countries, striving for mutual understanding is unquestionable (Beacom, 2000; Zintz, 2013).

From the point of view of the Slovak Republic, thanks to our best athletes who participate in various international events, the reputation of the country abroad increases. Athletes help to develop Slovakia’s main priorities which include good relations among countries neighbouring with us. For instance, in order to develop positive neighbourly relations between Slovakia and Ukraine, the Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Ministry of Education, Science, Youth and Sport of Ukraine has been signed by the representatives of both states.

To conclude, sport and sports diplomacy play an important role in international communication and in the representation of states. They are helpful in developing international cooperation and promoting foreign policy. Sport thus represents a means of international understanding and a tool for promoting economic cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Sport as an important tool of cultural and public diplomacy contributes to strengthening the reputation and good image of a particular country abroad. It facilitates relations with partner countries and it may be a part of the dialogue within the framework of public diplomacy. Cooperation in the field of sport contributes to better relations among states. Furthermore, sport may be included in external assistance programs where it is included in programs related to education, health care, socio-economic development and mitigating ethnic conflicts. In this context, sport is an inseparable part of international cooperation and foreign policy, especially from the point of view of the representation of the country abroad.

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