

## THE ROLE OF SPORT IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** The geopolitical context in which we live today brings us to a current European situation that is difficult to predict, but also increasingly difficult to manage in terms of events. The context in which we find ourselves illustrates two specific situations that can generate instability in Europe and beyond, on the one hand the invasion of Russia against Ukraine and on the other hand the unimaginable attack of the militant group Hamas on Israel. Sport, in the world, plays an important role in maintaining peace, in building *sports bridges* between peoples. In the current European and global context, we believe that a special importance must be given to international sports actions and to the organization of large-scale sports events in as many areas of the world as possible. Sport is an important investment in the present and in the future, with the power to trigger social change, to develop the community, fostering peace and understanding in society. Through sport barriers are broken down, cultures are united and the best team or athlete is applauded on stage.

**Keywords:** *sport, geopolitical context, peace, Olympism.*

### Introduction

In the current situation there are many discussions and situations related to armed conflicts, attacks, religious conflicts, which have created a state of unrest and insecurity in the world. The world's major capitals are becoming increasingly insecure, key European and global institutions have become targets of possible terrorist attacks, the independence and sovereignty of some states is being undermined by other states with other theories or manipulative conspiracies. More and more often today we hear words such as: military technique, army, attack, drone, conquest, etc. Bilateral relations between states are deteriorating, diplomacy is losing its main objectives, political governments are becoming more and more unaccountable in the face of such European or global challenges. The

Russian invasion was met with widespread international condemnation:

- The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution condemning the invasion and calling for the complete withdrawal of Russian forces.

- The International Court of Justice ordered Russia to suspend military operations.

- The Council of Europe expelled Russia.

Many countries have imposed sanctions on Russia and its ally Belarus and have offered humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. There have been protests around the world to raise awareness and stop military fighting between states immediately. All these important actions on a large scale have not had the desired effect and we are still witnessing an extremely complicated situation that seems long-lasting.

Nelson Mandela said, in 2000, that "Sport has the power to change the world. It has

the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. [...] Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination” (The Global Goals, 2021). Echoing the words of the South African leader, the United Nations Organisation (UN) Declaration of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Ana L. - *Sport as a tool for peace*) recognises the privileged place of sport in contributing to development and peace objectives. The United Nations has recognized from the beginning the power of sport to unite individuals and groups by supporting sport development efforts, campaigns, and sport-related initiatives (Agerpres, 2023).

#### Topic addressed

##### *Sport - a tool for development and peace*

Firstly, sport is a competitive activity involving two or more opponents representing or belonging to formally organised associations, involving physical and mental effort by the competitors (Nixon, 1984). Over time, sport has played an important role in all societies. A multitude of scientific journals address sport, published under the auspices of internationally recognised organisations and publishers such as Human Kinetics, Taylor & Francis, Inc., Routledge, Elsevier, Sage, McGraw-Hill, American College of Sports Medicine or British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences (LeUnes, 2008). Also, different models of sport performance are available in the literature (see Roul, 1998, Dragnea & Mate-Teodorescu, 2002; Neagu, 2010; Predoiu, 2016), among which we mention: Cratty's 1967 model (social, structural, physiological and psychological factors influence performance); Per-Olof Åstrand's 1968 model (presents functional factors influencing performance); Bouchard's model (1971) in which heredity, physical, psychological, physiological and social factors, sport

training factors and factors related to training organization and planning are considered essential; Alderman's model (1974) in which natural (genetic) physical abilities, specific aptitudes, the level of physical characteristics and psychological elements are decisive; Klissouras' model of 1983 (the three essential factors involved in obtaining sports performances are considered to be the environmental, psychological and biological factors) or Thomas' model (1986) in which personal characteristics (aptitudes, attitudes, personality, motivation), psychological environment, family and physical environment (distances, equipment, geographical features, etc.), practice, coach, time organisation, culture and politics influence performance.

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly has decided (23.08.2013) to designate 6 April as the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. Sport has been officially recognised as an important enabler of sustainable development, with the United Nations including it in its Sustainable Development Goals. Sport is an essential tool in peace-building efforts and an important investment in the present and the future. Sport has the power to trigger social change, to develop communities, fostering understanding within society (The International Platform on Sport and Development - *The role of sport in peacebuilding*).

This year too (on 6 April 2023), the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace was celebrated, the theme of the day being "Scoring for People and Planet". As in previous years, this overarching theme allows activities to focus on the impact of sport on sustainable development and peace (Agerpres, 2023). Sport has been recognized and used as a high-impact tool in humanitarian and peace-building efforts (United Nations - *International Day of Sport for Development and Peace, 6 April*). One year ago (2022), the global theme of the

International Day of Sport for Development and Peace was "Securing a Sustainable and Peaceful Future for All: The Contribution of Sport" (United Nations, 2022), again being a means to promote sport as a tool for sustainable development, supporting human rights.

The universal language of sport has the power to connect societies and improve the quality of people's lives, encouraging diversity, equality and inclusion in various sporting events that facilitate inter-human communication (Ana L. - *Sport as a tool for peace*). Sport promotes tolerance, respect and moral values (Yaffe et al., 2021).

The only fighting that is allowed is the sporting one, in sports competitions, where the best compete on the basis of clear rules, based on fair play. We can discuss, in sport, about instrumental aggression, which is applauded, being within the boundaries of the game (dispossessing an opponent in football, performing a technical procedure in martial arts, etc.), as opposed to hostile aggression whose main aim is to hurt the other person - this aggression (hostile) is seen as an end in itself (Makarowski et al., 2021; Buss & Perry, 1992). It is a struggle in sport where the main players, athletes, coaches, staff, leaders, are applauded on stage regardless of the outcome. The sport fight remains the fight in the sport arena and nothing more!

Sport must be supported so that it can carry its mission of development and peace around the world. International sports federations must adopt a new and useful concept of organising large-scale international sports competitions, a model for which is the International Football Federation, organising World or European Championships in several countries. This creates a huge sporting community, united around a single goal, the beauty of sport and sporting competition.

One successfully implemented concept was Euro 2020, held in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The international sports competition took place in eleven

stadiums in 11 European countries (Ziare.com, 2021): Bucuresti – National Arena; Munchen – Allianz Arena; Copenhagen – Parken; Londra – Wembley; Baku – National Stadium; Roma – Stadio Olimpico; Amsterdam – Johan-Cruyff-Arena; St. Petersburg – Kretovski Stadium; Glasgow – Hampden Park; Budapesta – Ferenc Puskas Stadium; Sevilla – Olympic Stadium. Romania was a successful participant in the organization of the European Football Championship together with other countries and we can say that it successfully contributed to what we call *Sport - an instrument for development and peace*.

UEFA EURO 2028, the European Football Championship will be hosted by England, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, while in 2032 the European Championship will be held in Italy and Turkey. For the 2028 edition, the host cities announced are (in alphabetical order): Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Dublin, Glasgow, Liverpool, London, Manchester and Newcastle. The final tournament in 2032 will be hosted in ten stadiums chosen by UEFA (The Union of European Football Associations). FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) has announced that the 2030 World Cup will be played in six countries: Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, on three continents: Europe, Africa and South America (Romanian Football Federation, 2023). From this approach of the International Football Federation or the European Football Federation we can say that the two international bodies have best understood and applied the concept of development and peace through sport. Moreover, they run various sports programmes aimed at encouraging the practice of football, both male and female. Sports programmes have an educational and social role, promoting teamwork regardless of country, nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc.

The organisation of major European and world football competitions shows the effort of international forums to promote team spirit, acceptance of different cultures and traditions. Different ways of life are coming together, accepting each other in harmony for one purpose - sport. Through sport or sporting competitions, barriers of any kind are removed, cultures are united, different music enlivens the atmosphere and the best team or athlete is applauded on stage.

### ***Sport - a life lesson***

World War was stopped for a football match. The miracle happened on Christmas Eve, when soldiers from both sides put down their weapons and fought with a FOOTBALL! (SPORT.RO, 2015). ***The First World War was one of the most destructive military conflicts, followed by the Second World War 25 years later. Between 1914 and 1918, millions of people died (as a result of World War I). In this extremely harsh context, a ray of light emerged on the front and caused the British and German armies to meet in the middle of the trenches and play... a game of football. In 1914, there was a fight for survival in the trenches. But on 25***

***December 1914, peace would last as long as a football match*** (Bogdan, 2022). On that historic day, sport (in this case, football) offered a beautiful lesson in fair play, but also in life. As the former British Corporal Ernie Williams recounted in 1983 - the ball came from somewhere, some goals were quickly made, a boy with some new gloves became goalkeeper and the match started. Many persons got involved into the game. British soldier Clement Bake of the Cheshire Regiment remembers that there were hundreds of people chasing the ball. No referee, nothing you know about football played in stadiums, people were just glad that they could all chase one ball (SPORT.RO, 2015). "I find it particularly moving to imagine those young men 100 years ago finding a common language in football to express their shared brotherhood. Today football is a universal language which opens our hearts, which enables contact between cultures and brings people together across all borders and frontiers" Michel Platini said, in 2014, at the ceremony which marked the 100th anniversary of the Christmas Truce (Demetriou, 2014).



Figure 1. A football match stopped for a few moments the First World War (Bogdan, 2022)

The day the war stopped for the great PELE! "O Rei" or "The King" as he is known around the world, Brazilian-born Pele was one of the greatest football players in history. During his career Pele (real name Edson Arantes do Nascimento), scored over 1,000 goals and won three

World Cups for Brazil. The day Pele stopped the war in Nigeria is a moving and inspiring story about the power of football to bring people together and end conflict (Morar, 2022). On February 4<sup>th</sup> 1969, an incredible event took place in Nigeria, an African country in the midst of a civil war.

The great Brazilian footballer managed to stop the fighting for a day, which took place between July 5<sup>th</sup> 1967 and January 13<sup>th</sup> 1970. In fact, Pele revealed that this episode, of stopping the war, is a milestone event in his career – *“One of my greatest pride was to have stopped a war in Nigeria, in 1969, in one the many football tours that Santos made around the world. [...] We were asked to play a friendly match on Benin City, in the middle of a Civil War, but Santos was so beloved that they agreed on a ceasefire on the matchday. It became known as the day that Santos stopped the war”, Pele wrote on his Twitter account in 2020.*

Diplomacy plays an important role in the development of relations between countries, exchanges of best practices, promotion and encouragement of tourism, development of industry, but the best ambassador of each country remains sport. Sport, through its valuable athletes and coaches, is the one that brings the greatest visibility to a state, athletes being those who make a sport-loving world vibrate, to applaud at the singing of the state/national anthem, every time they climb the highest steps of the podium.

The Olympic Charter is the codification of the Fundamental Principles of Olympism, Rules and Implementing Texts adopted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). It governs the organisation, actions and functioning of the Olympic Movement and lays down the conditions under which the Olympic Games are held (Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee – Legislation). The Olympic Charter can be viewed/ consulted here (International Olympic Committee, 2021): <https://www.cosr.ro/downloads/Olympic-Charter.pdf>. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) mission is to promote Olympism throughout the world. The IOC’s roles, including education of youth through sport, to act against any form of discrimination, to protect clean athletes and the integrity of sport, or to promote safe sport and the protection of athletes,

can be viewed here: <https://olympics.com/ioc/mission>. Also, the IOC Principles and vision - “Building a better world through sport” can be consulted here: <https://olympics.com/ioc/principles>. Not least, in the context of the current paper, we consider important to be aware of the Athletes’ Rights and Responsibilities Declaration, adopted by the 133rd IOC Session in Buenos Aires on behalf of the Olympic Movement (10.09.2018), which can be found here (in English): [https://www.gymnastics.sport/site/pdf/safe-guarding/IOC\\_Athletes\\_rights\\_and\\_responsibilities\\_declaration.pdf](https://www.gymnastics.sport/site/pdf/safe-guarding/IOC_Athletes_rights_and_responsibilities_declaration.pdf), and here (in Romanian): [https://snst.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Declaratia\\_Drepturilor\\_si\\_Responsabilitatilor\\_Sportivilor-1.pdf](https://snst.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Declaratia_Drepturilor_si_Responsabilitatilor_Sportivilor-1.pdf).

With respect to the Olympic Movement in Romania, in 2014 (at 100 years since the founding of the Romanian Olympic Committee), Horia Alexandrescu mentioned that a century of Olympic sport in Romania means a country where education and physical education preceded these 100 years by far, it means teachers, coaches, trainers, technicians, doctors who have learned and applied modern sciences in the arenas of high performance sport, it means state policies aimed at supporting the specific activity of performance sport and, last but not least, it means a National Olympic Committee that respects the values and the Olympic spirit, promoting them under the sign of fair-play and peace (Alexandrescu, 2014).

### Conclusions

It is increasingly clear, in our view, that the sporting world has a growing understanding of the role and importance of sport in the world. More and more, attempts are being made through sport or international sporting events to create a community with the main objectives of peace, the beauty of interaction between peoples, the harmonisation of relations between countries, the presence of

different civilisations in the same locations, cultural and religious exchanges. All these objectives around a phenomenon called sport. It is sports activity and sports competition that can create acceptance of diversity through one word – *Together*. From a global perspective it is important to have high level European or world governments or institutions giving priority to sport and its benefits in the world. The change of perspective in the geopolitical approach must be to see sport as an important instrument of action between peoples/countries or within peoples of the same country, an instrument of conflict mitigation. Sport education must be a major objective, and the great athletes and coaches (men and women) must be the main instrument of action to achieve the major objective – peace.

At European and world level, governments and parliaments need to work together to develop partnerships in sport in order to organise major sporting events. At European level, in such a context, a fund for the organisation of sporting events is needed, with a clear objective of eligibility for funding, with venues in at least two countries. This working model or organisational practice provides us with the trajectory to eliminate barriers of any kind between countries. Today's barriers between people cannot be eliminated by short-term objectives, but a long-term approach in a common European or global strategy would be a safe way forward. From a future perspective of building European or global agendas it is important to consider introducing relevant themes of building a united sporting world around one goal, acceptance. An acceptance of common values, of traditions and customs, an acceptance of religions and diversity. Sport gives us the safe and irreplaceable image of what it means to fight. Fight in sporting competition!

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