

Sports and Politics – How Propaganda of Non-Democratic Regimes Exploits Sports and Sportsmen

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There has been a great deal of discussion and debates in the history of both world and Georgian sport whether or not sportsmen from democratic nations should take part in sports events hosted by such autocracies or totalitarian regimes as Russia, China or the former USSR. Usually, one of the sides of these debates claims that we should differentiate between sports and politics. However, is such differentiation really possible? And to what extent does the political regime, hosting a specific sports event, differentiate between sport and politics? We may say that there is a straightforward answer to that question and exploitation of sport for political purposes is an integral part of playbook of such non-democratic countries. There are plenty of facts, nonetheless, when governing bodies of certain types of sport or individual sportsmen continue having good rapport with the architects of non-democratic regimes.

In accordance with the Human Rights Foundation,² “sports, celebrities, and institutions doing business with authoritarian regimes typically dismiss human rights concerns as “politics” or suggest that engagement with dictatorial regimes help closed societies open up and reform. In reality, by doing business with dictators, celebrities, athletes, and institutions become the messengers of their narrow political ideology”. The 2021 report of the same organization includes numerous cases of such collaboration: visit of the president of the International Ice Hockey Federation to Belarus and friendly meeting with the authoritarian leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko,³ US National Basketball Association’s (NBA) partnership⁴ with Rwanda’s ruling regime,⁵ as well as years-long partnership⁶ between London-based football club Arsenal and Rwanda’s government tourism fund (Visit Rwanda). There are some misgivings vis-à-vis the FIFA, world football governing body, which made very suspicious and controversial decisions

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² Human Rights Foundation (2021). *Igniting the Truth Against Authoritarian Sportswashing*. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3esUUg8> (12.10.2022).

³ Williams, M. & Tétrault-Farber, G. (11 January, 2021). *Angering critics, Belarus' Lukashenko hugs world ice hockey boss*. Reuters. Accessible at: <https://reut.rs/3yyLyGm> (12.10.2022).

⁴ Basketball Africa League (the BAL). *Partners*. Accessible at: <https://on.nba.com/3TjNt9T> (12.10.2022).

⁵ The Economist (2021). *How does Paul Kagame, Rwanda's president, get away with it?* Accessible at: <https://econ.st/3EArbfB> (12.10.2022).

⁶ Smith, A. (21 September, 2021). *Arsenal face questions over Visit Rwanda sponsorship deal amid human rights abuse allegations*. Football.London. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Vmmj40> (12.10.2022).

to award hosting 2018 and 2022 World Cup tournaments to Russia and Qatar, respectively.⁷ There is nothing new that there are regular gross human rights violation taking place in both of these countries. In addition, as reported by The Guardian, preparatory works for Qatar 2022 World Cup claimed lives of thousands of workers.⁸ Furthermore, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Formula 1, as part of which USD 650 million contract was signed and Riyadh was awarded right to host one of the stages of Formula 1,⁹ has also been a matter of heated debates. Winter Olympics in Beijing which major Western powers boycotted diplomatically¹⁰ because of numerous inhumanities committed by China's communist regime, was also an important event in 2022. The decision to hold the Olympic Games in Beijing, as well as one awarding 2014 Winter Olympics to Sochi, raise many questions about integrity of the International Olympic Committee.¹¹

The abovementioned instances are only a fraction of forceful and morally controversial intersections of sport and politics. However, the aim of this paper is not to investigate reasons why sports industry agrees to such forms of doing business. Our objective is to assess what motivates another party of the deal – political leaders – and why they spend resources for hosting sports events or being affiliated with specific sportsmen.

In his work, “The Dictators Discover Sport” (2014), John Tunis wrote¹² that use of sport in ruling the country has several major reasons. First of all, sport consumes time and occupies minds of youth to a maximum possible extent so they can sense satisfaction from national sport victories. In addition, regime aims to use agenda of youth involved in sports to ensure they have no time to think about politics, agitate or join the anti-government rallies. Moreover, physically active citizens were potential military manpower for such totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. One more and most relevant reason for today which animates leaders of the non-democratic regimes when it comes to sport, is propaganda. According to Tunis, “Dictators have cleverly used sport as propaganda. No sensible person believes that a

⁷ Panja, T. & Draper, K. (6 April, 2020). U.S. Says FIFA Officials Were Bribed to Award World Cups to Russia and Qatar. *The New York Times*. Accessible at: <https://nyti.ms/3rQ6KE8> (12.10.2022).

⁸ The Guardian (23 February, 2021). Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded. Accessible: <https://bit.ly/3RT8180> (12.10.2022).

⁹ Davies, A. & Noor Haq, S. (7 September, 2021). *Saudi Arabia to host maiden F1 Grand Prix, but human rights abuses overshadow country's global sporting ambitions*. CNN. Accessible at: <https://cnn.it/3CrLLfB> (12.10.2022).

¹⁰ BBC NEWS (4 February, 2022). Beijing Winter Olympics boycott: Why are the Games so controversial? Accessible at: <https://bbc.in/3yAcy8u> (12.10.2022).

¹¹ Rowan, P. (9 February, 2022). *8 Lessons from Investigations into the Olympics*. Global Investigative Journalism Network. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3g4cY0B> (12.10.2022).

¹² Tunis, J. R. (2014). *The Dictators Discover Sport*. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Jul., 1936), pp. 606-617. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3enSUFi> (12.10.2022).

victory for the United States at the coming Olympic Games would furnish proof of American racial, intellectual, moral or physical superiority. Not so in dictatorship countries. If Italy conquers England in football, Mussolini plays up the victory as another example of the superiority of a fascist state over a democracy.”¹³ There are a number of other scholars who also set forth this argument, including Xavier Pujadas,¹⁴ who argues that in between of the WWI and WWII some authoritarian rulers in Europe saw sport as unmatched platform for their national propaganda. There is a classic case of Italy and Benito Mussolini in this regard, since Italy was a nation which showcased propaganda efficiency of international sport triumphs. Mussolini’s National-Fascist party not only institutionalized football (as a “fascist game”), but strived to use it to control public opinion, penetrate daily lives of the citizens and gain advantage at international arena (Martin, 2004¹⁵). Italy’s 1934 World Cup was a perfect illustration of this approach. Nazi Germany employed a similar approach, effectively carrying out propaganda operation during 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin.¹⁶

The Soviet regime used sports for similar purposes, which was most clearly demonstrated during the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics. Those Olympics should have been a symbol of the power and glory of the USSR. “As sport and especially the Olympics are associated with peace and have an ability to unite millions of people all over the world, for authoritarian, totalitarian, and aggressor regimes, it is the best mean for distracting the attention of international society from the crimes of the regime, improving the reputation of the country and, to some point, legitimizing the existing regime. For the Soviet Union, the 1980 Summer Olympics had the same importance” (IDFI).¹⁷ According to another scholar, Aleksandra Vladimirova (2020), 1980 Summer Olympics, despite being boycotted by multiple Western countries and being faced with other hindrances, can be considered as the most spectacular propaganda event organized by the Soviet Union.”¹⁸

¹³ Ibid. p. 607

¹⁴ Pujadas, X. (2014). Sport Under Authoritarian Regimes in Times of Crisis. *32(2), 9-11 Revista de Psicologia, Ciències de l’Educació i de l’Esport ISSN: 1138-3194*.

¹⁵ Cited by Pujadas (2014).

¹⁶ De Waele, J. & Trif, A. (2020). Introduction: Soccer Under Authoritarian Regimes. *SOCCKER & SOCIETY*, VOL. 21, NO. 6, 625-628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2020.1775048>

¹⁷ Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI). (13 August, 2020). Russian Sports and Politics. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3CSR5u6> (12.10.2022).

¹⁸ Vladimirova, A. (2020). *Sport as a Part of the State Propaganda System in Russia*. Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper University of Oxford. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3RQWwOd> (12.10.2022).

Robert Adam¹⁹ describes how the Romanian football was used as a propaganda instrument in the interests of the communist authorities. The author analyzes difficulties for football from 1938 to 1989 and argues that football had already been popular in the beginning of 20th century, although once propaganda discovered it, football gained a national prominence and therefore became a propaganda instrument. The Romanian football had a very successfully streak during 1980ies which coincided with Ceausescu's rule and lent credibility to the "claim" intended for the domestic audience that communist society was in fact superior.

Speaking of sport and politics being interconnected in the 21st century, it is the Russian Federation that comes to mind first. Although the Russian sports were able to a certain extent to develop freely in the 1990ies, in 2002 the Presidential Council for Development of Physical Culture and Sports was established. Similar to many other areas, recently elected Vladimir Putin also sought in sports to restore the Soviet traditions and use sports for propaganda purposes, cultivation of national sentiments and overshadowing problematic issues. Vladimirova (2020) wrote that from that moment, sport regained the national importance and one of the major tasks of the abovementioned Presidential Council is to regularly inform the President about state of sport both within Russia and abroad. Vladimirova also adds that despite Putin's ambitions to use sport as a propaganda weapon, it is hard to say that he succeeded internationally. It was hindered by a massive doping scandal in the Russian sports which basically undermined the effect of 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and 2018 FIFA World Cup.²⁰ It was understood that holding 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, widely regarded to be Putin's personal victory, instilled hopes in the Russian President that it would allow mending his internationally damaged image and cast a shadow on his crimes through this large-scale event.²¹ However, it is possible to say that these hopes never materialized. All the more, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, prospects of using Russian sports for propaganda purposes internationally were eventually buried. Currently, Russia has been barred from every international tournament. However, despite international failure, we may assume that Putin's sport propaganda also had its effect at a national level which is not a less important objective for the Russian "brain-washing" apparatus.

¹⁹ Adam, R. (2020). *Football and authoritarianism in twentieth century Romania: between propaganda and subversion*. *SOCCER & SOCIETY*. 2020, VOL. 21, NO. 6, 657-666. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2020.1775043>

²⁰ Vladimirova, A. (2020). *Sport as a Part of the State Propaganda System in Russia*. Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper University of Oxford. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3RQWwOd> (12.10.2022).

²¹ Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI). (13 August, 2020). Russian Sports and Politics. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3CSR5u6> (12.10.2022).

There have been myriad facts of using sport for propaganda purposes in the 21st century. For instance, 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing which effectively served as a symbol of rising China²² as well as abovementioned 2022 Winter Olympics in China. For scholars, it gets increasingly interesting to study different sports as aspects which has a role in shaping social and political realms and building collective identities. Sports and politics are still inalienable in Russia, China or countries run by similar regimes. It is noteworthy that not only rulers of the great empires, but local authoritarian leaders often resort to such methods. A perfect illustration here would be sport aspirations of Ramzan Kadyrov, dictator of the Chechen Republic and great eulogist and emulator of Vladimir Putin. In 2021, Visit Chechnya Instagram account posted a video showing Kadyrov sparring with the UFC (elite division of mixed martial arts) superstar, Khamzat Chimayev.²³ It was not the first case when Kadyrov posed with popular sportsmen as he had hosted Floyd Mayweather, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, Ronaldinho and numerous UFC fighters. In addition, during 2018 FIFA World Cup (which Russia hosted), Kadyrov took a picture with Mohammed Salah,²⁴ a star of the modern football. Through demonstrating his relations with sports celebrities, including the UFC fighters, Kadyrov seeks to elevate his personal image as embodiment of Chechen ideals and “machoism”. Such exploitation of celebrities enables his regime to shift attention from the crimes he and his acolytes have committed.

Use of world sport celebrities by Ramzan Kadyrov and kindred rulers is a classic example of a propaganda technique known as testimonial in a scholarly literature. This is a very well-tested propaganda technique which implies use of famous people to portray products, individuals/groups or politician in a good light.²⁵ In addition, use of sport for political purposes in the modern world is also referred as Sportswashing. This is the practice of reputation laundering through sports, be it ownership of a sports club, hosting a tournament of either continental or world importance or sponsorship of a certain sports team. A country or a politician typically gets involved in such activity with hopes that general popularity of sport will revamp their image.²⁶ As mentioned earlier, use of sport for such objectives has a long history,

²² De Waele, J. & Trif, A. (2020). Introduction: Soccer Under Authoritarian Regimes. *SOCCER & SOCIETY*, VOL. 21, NO. 6, 625-628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2020.1775048> (12.10.2022).

²³ Instagram.com <https://bit.ly/3TdyP3U>

²⁴ BBC SPORT. (12 June, 2018). *World Cup 2018: 'Salah used for political capital' as Chechnya host Egypt training*. Accessible at: <https://bbc.in/3yDen4r> (12.10.2022)

²⁵ Vincent, R. C. (2006), *Global Communication, and Propaganda*. In book: *Transnational Media and Global Communication*. Edition: 2d Chapter: 11. Publisher: Wadsworth Publishing Co Editors: Y. R. Kamalipour. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3eqLly3> (12.10.2022).

²⁶ WAMU NPR. (15 March, 2022). *Authoritarian governments are using sports to improve their reputations*. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3SVXLx0> (12.10.2022).

although the term Sportswashing has become popular in the course of the last decade. "They [non-democratic regimes] are using and increasingly seeing sport as an opportunity to launder their image," argues Felix Jakens, Amnesty International UK's head of campaigns, in his interview with NPR, further clarifying that "it's the process whereby a country or regime with a particularly poor human rights record uses sport as a way of creating positive headlines".²⁷

Through illustrating relevant examples, we tried to answer why non-democratic regimes seek affiliation with sport and successful sportsmen. In sum, the reasons are as follows: galvanizing nationalism, demonstrating superiority of their nation based on sports achievements, show of force, giving "new life" through sport successes to their rule suffering from fragile legitimacy, overshadowing transgressions and crimes of the authorities, mending off their images at national and international levels and gaining public's favor through bandwagoning behind sports celebrities. Eventually, all these objectives are brought together under common propaganda umbrella. Therefore, non-democratic regimes use sport as one of their propaganda weapons.

The attempted bandwagoning behind a successful sportsman and using him for propaganda purposes has been a very hot topic recently in the Georgian politics as well. In September, the first session of the Parliament of Georgia was opened with debates²⁸ about a celebrated winger of the Georgian national football team and Italian Napoli, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. The Government of Georgia which experienced a heavy setback this year when the country was denied EU membership candidate status²⁹ (as opposed to Ukraine and Moldova) and is struggling to show any meaningful achievements to the population in the socio-economic field as well, has stepped up efforts to bandwagon with such important institutions or persons (reported and confirmed by relevant public opinion polls) such as Georgian Orthodox Church or the Patriarch himself. It was an example of such bandwagoning when the Georgian authorities started to showcase their contribution in the success³⁰ of young Georgian football star and claim the player as "one

²⁷ Mai, H. J. (2 December, 2021). *Saudi Arabia and China are accused of using sports to cover up human rights abuse*. NPR. Accessible at: <https://n.pr/3VowZz5> (12.10.2022).

²⁸ Tskipurishvili, N. (6 September 2022). Why Khvicha Kvaratskhelia has become one of the main issues of discussion in the Parliament. Netgazeti.ge. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Sa5Jl7> (12.10.2022).

²⁹ Radio Freedom. (17 June, 2022). European Commission: Conditions for Georgia to obtain candidate status and candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova with conditions. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3RWqEb9> (12.10.2022).

³⁰ Radio Fortuna (8 September 2022). Kaladze: "We stand ready to stand to bring up more Khvicha Kvaratskhelias, more successful people for the country". Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Te3gXy> (10.12.2022).

of their own”. At the first glance, such behavior of the Georgian authorities may seem not really disturbing. However, a full context is important in this regard. Today, Georgia does not certainly follow the democratic development path. This is attested first and foremost by failure to be granted the EU membership candidate status and numerous concerns about independence of the judiciary, elite corruption, lack of accountability, silencing free media, etc.³¹ Furthermore, there are well-evidenced assessments,³² that the Georgian government is getting increasingly authoritarian. In this light, on top of largely negative agenda currently dominating the country, the government further inflames the situation by sending negative and plausibly propaganda messages targeting their opponents, civil sector, journalists and people who are critical of the government.³³ In this case too, the ruling party not only bandwagoned behind a specific sportsman and sought to appropriate his success – which could have been something less outrageous – but spearheaded a smear campaign against the opponents through manipulation of this issue. In particular, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, who had played in Russia before moving to Italy, when asked about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine did not express unequivocal support to Ukraine and did not condemn the Russian aggression (in contrast with many Georgian or foreign athletes), merely saying it was a political issue.³⁴ This answer drew some criticism from the public and the controversy was about to be over quickly. Nevertheless, it has become a good inspiration for the government propaganda. It was this criticism that the ruling party and pro-government media³⁵ used to mold their campaign that the opposition and opposition supporters fight successful Georgian football player, are unhappy for his success and thereby demonstrate their “treacherous” nature once again. During his speech at the session of the Parliament of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, chairperson of the ruling Georgian Dream party stated that the opposition and its supporters “will lose their fight against Kvaratskhelia, like they lost their fight against the Patriarch and the Church”.³⁶

³¹ Gvindadze, S. (17 June 2022). European Commission’s 12 Recommendations in Brief: What Georgia Should Do to Obtain EU Membership Candidate Status. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3TkOS1H> (12.10.2022).

³² Zedelashvili, D. (5 March 2021). Rule of Justice in Georgia *Verfassungsblog*. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3VjEtTU> (12.10.2022).

³³ Kutidze, D (2021). The Government of Georgia’s Aggressive and Propaganda Rhetoric Against Media –Proven Method of the Authoritarians to Discredit the Journalists. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3ExbAxD> (12.10.2022).

³⁴ Radio Commercant (16 July 2022). Khvicha Kvaratskhelia Being Targeted by Negative Campaign from Certain Groups – The Ministry Expresses Support for the Player”. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3etwjYi> (12.10.2022).

³⁵ POSTV. (8 September 2022) Why the Radical Opposition is Against Khvicha Kvaratskhelia? [video] YouTube. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3eqxyHY> (12.10.2022).

³⁶ Formula (6 September 2022). Autumn Session and the Political “Debates” in the Parliament. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Mo8s8Y> (12.10.2022).

In light of myriad challenges both within the country and across the region and when the Georgian political elites, especially the authorities, face the task to bring Georgia closer to the Western and democratic communities, opening a parliamentary session with a speech about a specific sportsman and “defending” him from criticism or imaginary enemies (particularly when a particular person does not require defense), is yet another proof how political propaganda seeks to overshadow real problems with sport and “launder” its own failures.