

Sport as an Instrument of Political Information Manipulation

Author: Davit Kutidze¹

Editor: Irina Gurgenchashvili²

The involvement of athletes in politics (or their "exclusion" when it is convenient for the goals of a particular political party) is nothing new. Athletes have appeared on the party lists of virtually every parliament in the country. Moreover, this is not unique to Georgia. At first glance, there is nothing wrong with athletes participating in politics, but it is important to identify the motives that make them attractive to political actors.

The use of the positive emotions associated with sports and famous athletes (who are sometimes perceived as national heroes) for political purposes is an effective way to divert public attention from pressing issues in the country and government misconduct. According to political researchers, this is a process where states use popular sporting events, teams, or athletes, both domestically and abroad, to "whitewash" their image and restore a tarnished reputation.³

John Tunis, in his work *The Dictators Discover Sport* (2014), wrote⁴ that there are several main reasons why governments use sports as a tool of governance. Sports help occupy the time and minds of young people as much as possible, allowing them to derive satisfaction from national sporting victories. In addition, the regime seeks to structure the daily lives of young people who are actively involved in sports in such a way that they have neither the time nor the inclination to think about politics, engage in political activism, or participate in demonstrations against the government. Furthermore, in totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, physically active citizens also represented a potential military force. Another, and currently the most relevant, motive driving the leaders of undemocratic regimes to use sports is propaganda. According to Tunis, "Dictators have cleverly used sports for propaganda. No reasonable person believes that a United States victory in the Olympics would prove the racial, intellectual,

¹ Research Fellow, Research Institute Gnomon Wise; e-mail: d.kutidze@ug.edu.ge

² Executive Director, Research Institute Gnomon Wise, e-mail: i.gurgenchashvili@ug.edu.ge

³ Kaushal, K. (2024). The Rise of Sportswashing: How the Support of the West and Global Apathy Enables International Human Rights Violations. *University Chicago International Law Review*. Volume 20, Issue 2. Via link: <https://lawecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1266&context=lucilr>

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

moral, or physical superiority of Americans. In dictatorships, the opposite is true... For example, if Italy beat England in football, Mussolini would present this victory as yet another example of the superiority of the fascist state over democracy."⁵

The use of sports and athletes for political propaganda remains relevant in the modern world. When cooperating with authoritarian regimes, sports organizations and athletes often turn a blind eye to gross human rights violations. They justify these relationships by claiming that their involvement contributes to the democratization and reform of closed states. In reality, however, by partnering with dictators, they become indirect agents of their political propaganda. There are many examples of such collaboration,⁶ including the use of hockey and its international federation by the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, the American National Basketball Association's (NBA) ties to the Rwandan regime, and the long-standing partnership between London's Arsenal and the Rwanda Tourism Development Fund (Visit Rwanda). The world football governing body, FIFA, has also faced severe criticism because of its controversial decisions. The organization selected Russia and Qatar to host the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups, despite both countries' systematic violations of fundamental rights. Formula 1's cooperation with Saudi Arabia has also been the subject of ongoing criticism. The parties signed a contract worth USD 650 million, which includes hosting one of the championship's races in the country. Another striking example was the 2022 Winter Olympics in China. As a result of the Chinese government's human rights abuses, a number of Western countries declared a diplomatic boycott of the event.

The most extensive example of the intersection between sports and politics is Saudi Arabia's strategy. Since 2016, the country has invested approximately USD 51 billion in various sports assets, including golf, football (for example, increasing its stake in Newcastle United to 85% in 2024 and securing the long-term hosting rights for the Spanish and Italian Super Cups in Riyadh), and combat sports (through regular UFC and WWE events). The Jeddah Formula 1 Grand Prix, which has been held annually since 2021, is also viewed by human rights organizations as serving to "whitewash" the country's international reputation.⁷ The culmination of this process came in December 2024, when FIFA awarded Saudi Arabia the right to host

⁵ Ibid. page: 607

⁶ Kutidze, D. (2022). Sport and Politics – How Propaganda of Non-Democratic Regimes Exploit Sports and Sportsmen Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/analytics/79>

⁷ Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB). (30 May, 2025). How the Saudi Grand Prix Fuels a Broader Sportswashing Strategy. Accessible at: <https://www.adhrb.org/2025/05/how-the-saudi-grand-prix-fuels-a-broader-sportswashing-strategy/>

the 2034 FIFA World Cup as the sole bidder.⁸ According to Human Rights Watch and other organizations, this decision, along with the invitation extended to Saudi Arabia to participate in the 2025 CONCACAF Gold Cup, is one of the clearest examples of the use of sport for political purposes.⁹

In the 21st century, a new term has emerged to describe the above and many other examples. In particular, the use of sports by leaders of non-democratic countries for propaganda purposes has been referred to as sportswashing. The term does not have a single universally accepted definition, but it is used to describe the process through which non-democratic regimes or large corporations invest in world-famous athletes, sports clubs, and events in order to divert attention from the illiberal, undemocratic, and exploitative practices of their countries or businesses. The use of sports by states can take several forms: hosting major events (e.g., the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup); creating new sports infrastructure and local leagues; investing in international teams and leagues; sponsorship by state institutions (e.g., tourism departments and national airlines); and using famous athletes as ambassadors. The emergence of the term sportswashing is often associated with the 2015 European Games in Baku. Amnesty International noted that these Games coincided with one of the most severe 12-month periods of repression in the country's history.¹⁰

An interesting perspective on study of sportswashing is offered by Kazakov (2026).¹¹ He criticizes the traditional understanding of this phenomenon as an attempt by authoritarian regimes to conceal their crimes and suggests a more in-depth approach. In particular, he argues that the term sportswashing is often used in an overly superficial way, while the reality is much more complex and multi-layered. The author suggests that this phenomenon should be understood not simply as a tool used by abusive states, but as a form of deep information manipulation involving numerous actors, the media, and audiences themselves. The work is based on five stages of the "life cycle of disinformation", developed using the example of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The first stage concerns the difficulty of establishing the truth,

⁸ Human Rights Watch. (17 January, 2024). Saudi Government Uses European Football to Sportswash its Reputation. Accessible at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/17/saudi-government-uses-european-football-sportswash-its-reputation>

⁹ Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB). (22 July, 2025). The Saudi Sportswashing Agenda Behind FIFA's Club World Cup and Concacaf Gold Cup. Accessible at: <https://www.adhrb.org/2025/07/the-saudi-sportswashing-agenda-behind-fifas-club-world-cup-and-concacaf-gold-cup/>

¹⁰ Collyer Merritt, E. (2024). Sportswashing: History, governing bodies, state investments and English football club ownership. UK Parliament - House of Lords Library. Via link: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/sportswashing-history-governing-bodies-state-investments-and-english-football-club-ownership/>

¹¹ Vitaly Kazakov (2026) 'Sportswashing' as mediated deceit: applying a critical disinformation model to address political (mis)communication through sports, International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 18:2, 293-313, DOI: 10.1080/19406940.2025.2583973

as Western media outlets disputed the number of workers who died in Qatar and often provided only superficial analyses of the facts. This inadvertently allowed the Qatari government to exploit this gap and redirect attention to other issues. The second stage involves the time factor: Qatar held the tournament in winter rather than summer, demonstrating how an initial promise can gradually transform into a deliberate deception that changes over time. The third stage, which culminated in the emotional and contradictory statements of the FIFA president, concerns the bargaining and negotiation processes among multiple actors. The fourth stage involves cultural barriers, demonstrating how the same information can acquire completely different meanings across different linguistic media environments. Finally, the cycle is completed through dialogical relations, in which actors constantly respond to each other's rhetoric and adjust their positions. Another equally important issue concerns audience emotions. Information manipulation is particularly effective because of spectators' emotional attachment to sports. For example, football fans often take the lead in defending their clubs' foreign owners and engaging in propaganda against their critics.¹² Therefore, it can be argued that studying the phenomenon of sportswashing through specific examples and contexts is essential and requires a multifaceted analysis.

The interaction between sports and politics in the modern world is becoming increasingly complex. Although sport is often perceived as a neutral and apolitical space, historical experience and contemporary practice demonstrate that it has repeatedly become an effective tool for achieving political goals. States and political elites use the symbolic power, mass appeal, and emotional influence of sports both to strengthen domestic legitimacy and to improve their international image.

In this context, sportswashing is not merely an attempt to improve reputation, but also a broader strategy of political communication and information manipulation. Its goal is often to divert attention from problematic state policies, human rights violations, or democratic backsliding toward positive and emotionally charged sporting events. At the same time, modern approaches demonstrate that the impact of sportswashing depends not only on the intentions of a particular actor. The media, sports organizations, commercial partners, and fans themselves play an important role in this process, as their emotional connection to sports can become an additional mechanism of manipulation.

¹² Ibid.

It is important to note that sportswashing should not be considered only in the context of major international sporting events. Its manifestations are also possible at the national level, when popular athletes, teams, or sporting achievements are used for political purposes. The example of Georgia, as well as a number of other countries, demonstrates that the high public authority of athletes can become a tool for gaining political support and redirecting political debates.

Ultimately, it can be argued that sport can serve both as a source of social unity and positive change and as a means of political manipulation. Therefore, a critical examination of the political use of sport is necessary for a better understanding of contemporary political communication strategies.