

SPORTS DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER: ANALYSIS AND PROSPECTS OF APPLICATION OF WORLD PRACTICES FOR UKRAINE

СПОРТИВНА ДИПЛОМАТІЯ І М'ЯКА СИЛА: АНАЛІЗ І ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ЗАСТОСУВАННЯ СВІТОВИХ ПРАКТИК ДЛЯ УКРАЇНИ

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Annotation. *This article explores the concept of sports diplomacy as an effective tool for enhancing national soft power and diplomatic reach, particularly for Ukraine. It examines successful models from Saudi Arabia, Australia, and the European Union. Saudi Arabia's approach demonstrates the power of using sports for global influence through significant investments and hosting international events. Australia's model highlights a government-led strategy that supports sports diplomacy, knowledge sharing and community development. The European Union's use of sports diplomacy focuses on promoting peace and cooperation among member states. For Ukraine, adapting these models offers a pathway to amplify its international voice and align sports initiatives with diplomatic goals. The article suggests that Ukraine can leverage sports diplomacy to strengthen international relationships, enhance its global presence, and promote values effectively.*

Key words: *Sports diplomacy, soft power, public diplomacy, global influence, Ukraine's foreign policy.*

Анотація. *У статті досліджується концепція спортивної дипломатії як ефективного інструменту використання м'якої сили в рамках публічної дипломатії, особливо для України. Стаття розглядає успішні практики спортивної дипломатії Саудівської Аравії, Австралії та Європейського Союзу. Підхід Саудівської Аравії демонструє як спортивна дипломатія посилює дипломатичний вплив через значні інвестиції та проведення міжнародних заходів. Модель Австралії вказує як урядова стратегія створює засади для успішного використання спортивної дипломатії і посилення впливу на регіон. Використання спортивної дипломатії Європейським Союзом зосереджено на сприянні миру та співпраці між державами-членами. Для України адаптація цих моделей пропонує шлях до посилення її міжнародного впливу та узгодження спортивних ініціатив з національними дипломатичними цілями. Стаття вказує, що Україна може використовувати спортивну дипломатію для зміцнення міжнародних відносин, посилення своєї глобальної присутності та ефективного просування цінностей.*

Ключові слова: *Спортивна дипломатія, м'яка сила, публічна дипломатія, глобальний вплив, зовнішня політика України.*

Introduction. Sports diplomacy has evolved into a powerful asset of soft power, urging countries to use it in public diplomacy efforts to support a larger governmental agenda, back diplomatic efforts, and amplify their international voices. The emerging powers and well-recognized actors develop strategies, hold events, and use sports as a platform to establish their image and communicate their values. In this regard, the cases of Australia, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union are blatant in showing how the government and governmental actors can use sports events to impact the international public and back the messages conveyed to them. For Ukraine, the specific approach provides an instrument to support Ukraine's diplomatic efforts, amplify crucial diplomatic messages, and impact diverse public actors.

The particular article explores the nature of sports diplomacy and the success of international actors in its implementation and offers implications for Ukrainian decision-makers and sports management people. The study problem requires an examination of successful cases of sports diplomacy application, their development, and applied frameworks. It will allow for a deeper understanding sports diplomacy realm and its prospects for Ukraine, especially in terms of a need to amplify international voice and align governmental efforts with diplomatic messages and strategy.

By evaluating and assessing developments and successful cases of sports diplomacy implementation, the research contributes to the discourse and shows how a government can use it to support diplomatic efforts on different levels. The particular research analyzes the key aspects and outcomes of sports diplomacy, contributing to our comprehension of the soft power, country image, and support of governmental initiatives.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of sports diplomacy, examine the experience and sports diplomacy application of third countries, and offer prospects of how Ukraine can use it to strengthen its international efforts.

Literature review. Even though the term sports diplomacy has been circulating academic circles for some time, it lacks a standalone definition and leaves room for its implications for high-level diplomacy as well as its impact on the public. Thus, the right approach contemplates mentioning the development of the term from a nation-state tool supporting governmental agenda or international position to the non-state application by organizations and various actors.

To begin with, it is crucial to consider that the early examinations of sports diplomacy describe sports events as an instrument to symbolize or underline diplomatic changes or developments. Peppard and Riordan (1992) use this term to display the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the USA, whereas Soares (2007) underlines the role of hockey in ideological rivalry during the Cold War.

Yet, another source (Millwood, 2022) offers a positive implication of sports diplomacy, sharing how Ping-pong diplomacy was crucial to supporting the establishment of relations between China and the United States in the 1970s. At the same time, Berg (2021) underlines the role of boycotts as a form of political communication. One most comprehensive review of sports diplomacy usage was performed by Postlethwaite, V., Jenkin, C., & Sherry, E in their work *Sport Diplomacy: An Integrative Review*.

Nevertheless, modern academic consideration of sports diplomacy contemplates its usage by non-state actors in the realms of peace promotion and principles sharing. Subject to Postlethwaite et al. (2022), such organizations as the United Nations, the International Olympic Committee, and the European Union are proactive in using this term to back peace agendas.

On the other hand, it is crucial to admit that the power of non-political personalities in exerting soft power. Subject to Polishchuk and Olishevskaya (2022), individuals, getting political acumen and skill, can “quantitatively unite significant masses of people” (p.16). Such a phenomenon can be traced in relation to famous sportspersons. It is backed by the idea that modern international relations do not exclude cooperation with actors that work across state borders and represent sub-state actors, individuals, or groups (Gebhard, 2017).

The review of these literature pieces allows for a deeper understanding of actors involved in the sports diplomacy exercised by the leading actors. With that in mind, there is an understanding that different states apply models and have peculiarities that emerge from the actors involved, the governmental system, and the foreign policy at the core.

Main results of the research. The analysis and perspectives of application of world practice for Ukraine require not only the evaluation of the successful cases performed by other countries but

also consideration of the peculiarities and resources of their international system in relation to Ukraine's agenda, resources, and domestic and international capabilities. In Ukraine, sports diplomacy is largely regulated via the system of sports committees and subdivisions of physical culture and sports that are funded by the state budget (Filippova, 2020). However, the lack of financing and security issues during wartime make it harder for Ukraine to host events, exercise costly campaigns, and participate in diverse sports tournaments.

It contemplates that Ukrainian state and non-state actors have to focus on horizontal strategies and have a targeted approach when choosing the right approach to shaping the policy and agenda of sports diplomacy. The applicable strategies will correspond to the partnerships, application of influence of individual actors, and joint projects with international non-state sports organizations and actors. The best perspectives would refer to the initiatives that will help Ukraine support its voice and international messages related to the Russian-Ukrainian war as some studies suggest that people (39%) "avoided news" about the war, especially in countries that are closer to Ukraine (Newman, 2023).

The successful cases of sports diplomacy allow for finding the principles and methods that can be applied by Ukraine. The first case that should be analyzed relates to Saudi Arabia and its efforts to use soft power and support its international image, alongside other reasons related to economic diversification and human rights issues. Importantly, Saudi Arabia, having enormous financial resources, adopted the strategy of investing in sports properties, hosting mega sporting events, and funding sports leagues of other countries. The roots of such a strategy emerged from the initiative of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman called "Vision 2030" (Ettinger, 2023). As a consequence, the football clubs of the minor Saudi Arabia league managed to bring famous football stars to the country, while Saudi actors invest in several big clubs in Europe and continue to discuss and close deals related to other popular sports, including F1, Tennis, and Golf (Martini, 2023).

The results of such developments have a substantial effect on economic diversification, create an image of an economic and entertainment hub, and allow the country to handle sportswashing (Ettinger, 2023). The latter term should be further discussed as if Ukraine considers Saudi Arabia as a partner in sports diplomacy, it can bring certain risks to Ukraine. There, *sportswashing* contemplates using sports events as "a deliberate attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information," for instance, human rights abuse (Bergkvist & Skeiseid, 2024). That way, via the image transfer, the countries can alter their perception of the country. Such a strategy supports public diplomacy through cross-cultural cooperation, top-level diplomatic meetings, and deeper cultural understanding.

One can doubt that there are solid implications of the experience of Saudi Arabia for Ukraine. Sure, considering the difference in financial capabilities and goals in foreign diplomacy goals, as well as the inability to host international events, Ukraine can not fully resort to the model applied by Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Ukraine can take several lessons from what Saudi Arabia did. Firstly, Ukraine can target famous sportspersons and with the help of other organizations, certain individuals, or simply based on common values, ask them to become ambassadors of Ukraine. In particular, such famous sportspersons as Andriy Shevchenko, Olexander Usyk, and Elena Svitolina already represent Ukraine's United24 initiative. (TES-D Project Team, 2024). Using industry, committee, and non-state connections, Ukraine should ask famous sportspersons to come to Ukraine, participate in Ukrainian initiatives, and convey messages about the Ukrainian war that come in line with Ukraine's foreign policy. The critical non-state actors that can be targeted should have enough influence so that the image can be transferred to benefit the goals of Ukraine.

Another perspective is concerned with the usage of Saudi Arabia's entertainment hub as a platform for networking and performance of Ukrainian sports stars. A vivid example of how it can be organized is the box event between Usyk and Fury, making Saudi Arabia a "leading country in the world for boxing" (Noble & Omran, 2024, par.4). This mega event can lay the foundation for further events, while for Ukraine it presents an opportunity to use the attention of media to amplify the message and promote the problems the country is experiencing. Notably, there are for sure some risks that Ukraine should try to mitigate. The fact that some people associate events in Saudi Arabia with sportswashing is just one of them. Yet, extrapolating this case to other regions, Ukrainian non-state

representatives can use their image to organize events in other countries and make an impact on the regional or local levels and niche sports.

Other than that, the important realm of sports diplomacy relates to the framework and guidelines laid down by the government. There, a successful case of how the government sets development refers to the Australian “Sports Diplomacy 2030” Strategy. According to Murray (2013, p.5), sport plays a vital “role in shaping a country’s identity and culture,” whereas the Australian Institute of Sport is considered one of the best practice models for athletes. However, what allowed Australia to turn such devotion into a soft power affecting their international in the region and world is the government-led strategy. Its power lies in the framework first set in the strategy 2015-2018, and now developed in the 2030 plan. Subject to the EU report (Parrish et al., 2022), the initial goal of the Australian sport diplomacy approach was to: empower Australian sports to represent Australia globally, build linkages with neighbors, attract investments and maximize trade, and strengthen communities through sports. It was made possible due to the focus on the use of technology, like the creation of portals for knowledge sharing, development pathways and sporting codes, and support of and participation in global efforts and institutional policies.

For instance, the Australian government reports that the wins of such a strategy were using more than 50 partnerships to enable more than 1 million participation in sporting activities and the creation of strong connections with “Asian region due to cooperation arrangements with India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka” (Australian Government, 2019, p.5). There, creating opportunities and pathways for knowledge sharing and leadership was crucial for sportspersons to learn aspects of sports diplomacy. It allowed them to use mechanisms to represent the country, conduct communication in line with national interests, and act as ambassadors of Australia.

The framework and experience of the Australian government can be extremely useful for Ukraine despite the lack of resources and capabilities to handle large campaigns and programs. In particular, focusing on building linkages with neighboring countries that support the sovereignty of Ukraine and strengthening Ukrainian communities abroad can help Ukraine raise awareness about the war and support the discourse that citizens of neighboring countries tend to ignore in the media. It can find its realization if Ukraine develops a unified Ministry-led policy that will offer a way to connect national actors and entities with communities and institutions abroad. There, the pathways, sporting codes, and access to participation in events will be crucial. Yet, the risks in this regard still exist, as migration concerns exist.

Another important practice that can be used by Ukraine lies in the provision of specific education about sports diplomacy to Ukrainian professional sportspersons. Australian strategy underlines the following points to empower Australian sport to represent Australia globally: enhance knowledge, skills, and connections, increase representation in international sporting bodies and associations, and develop tools to share governmental expertise and successes with the sports industry (Australian Government, 2019, p. 11). As a result, the strategy offers a comprehensive tool where a non-state actor gets knowledge, tools, platform, and influence to represent the country and convey necessary messages. Importantly, the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Ukraine has already taken the first steps by announcing Training on Sports Diplomacy for professional sportspersons and representatives of the Ministry and Committees (Ministry of Youth and Sport of Ukraine, 2024). However, to maximize the possible effects, a more comprehensive approach may be needed, that will offer knowledge systems, continuous training, and support. For instance, for the top professionals who already are ambassadors of the UNITED 24 platform, it can be crucial knowledge to represent the country and raise the issues that require coverage. In the end, looking at the experience of Australia, proper education and training of non-state actors can allow them to perform the functions that nowadays envoys and diplomats perform.

Lastly, the development of sports diplomacy in the EU requires analysis as it offers decent opportunities for Ukraine and its non-state sportspersons. Ukraine can take advantage of initiatives and developments provoked by the EU resolutions and learn from the experience of member states. It is worth noting that sport seems to fail to be “of primary importance to EU policymakers”, yet, there is strong opportunity and potential for the growth emerging from a problem stream, an issue recognized by the society, and the latest resolution related to sports diplomacy (Parrish, 2022). The main issues of EU sports diplomacy refer to a lack of collective voice, even though some member

states adopted national sports diplomacy strategies and the chaotic nature of how the agenda is established. However, the existence of a political stream in regard to sports diplomacy, and its prioritization in the last two consecutive EU Work Plans, contemplates the creation of a new strategy with renewed frameworks and funding instruments (Parrish, 2022).

For Ukraine, it offers certain opportunities to connect with neighboring countries, and crucial partners and back an established discourse for sustainable peace. In particular, the EU organizational culture, representing a “set of principles and rules that will serve as the basis for making decisions and implementing measures”, seems to be a crucial component of the future framework (Parrish et al., 2022, p.42). Thus, Ukraine should take it into account when building its own sports diplomacy approach, so that in pursuit of reaching global audiences via sports diplomacy there is no mismatch with the neighboring countries and potential sports partners in the European Union.

Also, the prioritization of sports diplomacy in EU Work Plans signals that Ukraine should consider how it can implement a discourse supporting Ukraine’s peace efforts into future policies. For instance, EU sports diplomacy aims to play an active role in the promotion of peace and stability, whereas the adoption of the Arrangement for Cooperation between the European Commission and the Union of the European Football Associations (UEFA), declared the promotion of “values and principles common in Europe” as one of its objectives (Parrish et al., 2022, p.14). It opens a room for lobbying the interests of Ukraine at the regulatory level and sets the discourse for regulations in regard to football matches under UEFA tournaments.

Concerning the experience of European countries, it is important to underline the activities of Croatia that leveraged its performance in the FIFA World Cup to strengthen its international image. For example, on the basis of the Croatian Sports Diplomacy Strategy, the “Croatian Ministry of Tourism and Sport and the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs” had a task to create a separate body to work on short-term sports diplomacy issues (Parrish et al., 2022, p.39). It implies that Ukraine can consider the creation of specific bodies before large sports events to support professional sportspersons during the events and help them handle communication and country representation effectively.

Conclusions. The analysis of sports diplomacy case studies of Saudi Arabia and Australia and developments within the European Union offers strategic insights for Ukraine, providing perspectives for leveraging sports to enhance international diplomacy and image.

Upon analysis of the approach by Saudi Arabia, it is clear that the country uses sports as a platform for soft power, through hosting events and making significant sports investments. It offers ways on how Ukraine could elevate its international presence. Despite financial constraints and opportunities, Ukraine could focus on maximizing its existing sports presence through famous sportspersons, using large events, developing partnerships and networking to use Saudi Arabia's platform, and, that way transfer image and diplomatic engagement.

The examination of Australia's model demonstrates the benefits of a government-led strategy that focuses on regional linkages, communities, and sports diplomacy knowledge sharing. Ukraine could adopt similar practices to learn non-state actors on sports diplomacy and leadership, use sports to strengthen community ties, and build international relationships. That way, it could enhance its global presence and be a part of the media agenda in neighboring countries.

Lastly, the developments within the European Union contemplate the potential adoption of a comprehensive strategy for sports diplomacy. It can be described as a window of opportunities, where Ukraine should consider collaborating with European sports bodies to advocate for peace and stability and align its sports diplomacy with broader European efforts to improve its standing in neighboring countries.

By adapting elements from these models, Ukraine can develop a robust sports diplomacy strategy that supports its diplomatic objectives and leverages sports as a tool for national development and international cooperation.

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