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# Equal Opportunities and Sport Regulation in the Context of Conflicts, Crises and Wars, Part 1

## The Effect of Geopolitical Changes on Sport and Specifically on Athletes

### Abstract

*There is much historical evidence showing that politics and sport have gone hand in hand throughout the past. More recently, sport has had to cope with a myriad of problems, including religious, political and economic interests and struggles, becoming a battleground for political interests. After the First World War, the political influence on sport was already visible, and the impact of decisions weighed heavily on athletes in particular. The Cold War and the ideological conflicts in the history of the post-World War II Olympics generated concrete actions and responses from politics and power. In this article, the authors analyse the events of the last two decades, highlighting the connections between military science and sport. They also present the application of the hard, medium and soft tools of hybrid warfare in sport through the lens of athletes' equal opportunities. Furthermore, the study highlights the links between geopolitical events and sport, as well as the ad hoc nature of the decisions that accompany them. The article also notes that the impact of war on sports can be severe, damaging an athlete's life and ruining a career carefully developed over time. The study concludes that ensuring security at Olympic events requires cooperation among the military, including special forces, law enforcement agencies, counterterrorism units, and civil and military national security services.*

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## Introduction

“[W]ar should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy; otherwise the entire history of war would contradict us.”<sup>4</sup>

What is special to sport is that it is a unique field where many countries participate in an international competition, in front of thousands of spectators, in one place. What can happen at the competitions goes far beyond the sporting event itself and has a major impact on political, social and economic relations. In many cases, sporting events – quite independently of the athletes themselves – are covert arenas for political, economic and religious conflicts and power games. The close intertwining of sport and politics has long been observed, with conflicts often shifting from the battlefield to the playing field. Signs of this can also be seen in the sport policy processes and decisions that are taking place today.

It can also be observed that several international sports organisations have been able to gain political influence through sport in recent years, using indirect tools to create positive and negative effects on athletes' participation in the sports competitive system and their nations, as well as on the countries hosting sporting events.

Our research has examined major sporting events and cases of the last century from the perspective of how war and crisis have interfered in the lives, performance and perception of athletes. The research drew on academic journals, professional peer-reviewed publications, online databases and other publications, and was based on interviews with security professionals with empirical experience.

The article discusses the Olympic Movement's stance towards war, which it seeks to promote through peace mediation. In our analysis, we review numerous events to highlight instances in which sporting events were associated with conflicts of various kinds. The article dedicates a specific section to the impact of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict on sport, as well as how geopolitical events have influenced athletes from the involved countries and the Olympic Movement as a whole.

Sporting events, especially the Olympic Games, are often used to achieve political goals and are often designed to exploit the influence of the attraction of sport based on the appeal for the audience.<sup>5</sup> Sport is therefore often used as a tool of soft power, as opposed to traditional hard power methods based on military and economic force, which tend to use force to achieve objectives.

In Tálas's definition, hard power is the power of coercion, while soft power is the power to attract. Soft power encompasses behaviours, tools and policies that exert influence on others through value-based appeal, encouraging them to voluntarily and without coercion accept the goals of the other party. In contrast, hard power is the set of methods and tools that influence the behaviours of others through direct coercion or the threat of coercion.<sup>6</sup>

According to Resperger's definition, hybrid warfare combines traditional and unconventional warfare methods (soft, medium and hard methods) in order to

<sup>4</sup> CLAUSEWITZ 1976: 88.

<sup>5</sup> ELCOMBE 2022.

<sup>6</sup> TÁLAS 2017: 24–27.

render the enemy defenceless and achieve the objectives, or to prevent a conflict from escalating to the level of war.<sup>7</sup> In his study, Resperger also mentions Hoffman's definition of hybrid threats as a method in which unconventional means, crimes, or even terrorism are used alongside traditional weapons to achieve political goals.<sup>8</sup> International organisations, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), could well be major targets for hybrid operations. Soft power is part of the diplomatic toolbox in hybrid operations, where the aim is to influence the leadership and the population of the enemy by indirect means. Sports diplomacy also falls into this category and can be used to achieve an impact in conflict management through the diplomatic use of indirect methods.

International major sporting events typically take place in the midst of global events that are also risky from a security perspective, so it is worth examining how global events have affected large-scale sporting competitions throughout 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century history. Despite the fact that point 5 of the Olympic Charter states that "sports organisations within the Olympic movement shall apply political neutrality",<sup>9</sup> the history of the modern Olympic Games up to the present day has shown that in many cases athletes have been victims of political gamesmanship.

During the Cold War period, sport also played a key role in escalating or bridging conflicts, culminating in the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. In the current context of wars, economic, political and ideological struggles and tensions, sport has once again become part of a broader political strategy.

History shows that, with the organisation of the modern Olympics Games, the IOC has played an increasingly important role in international politics. A prime example of this is the fact that, in 2009, the IOC was granted Permanent Observer status at the United Nations (UN),<sup>10</sup> making it one of the few organisations that has free access to most meetings and relevant documentation, and can participate as an observer in the work and annual sessions of the General Assembly and maintain permanent offices at UN headquarters.<sup>11</sup>

In his article, Kiss argues that the "states are transferring more and more of their sovereignty to supranational institutions such as the United Nations, European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) etc."<sup>12</sup>

International law treats international organisations as its legal subjects.<sup>13</sup> According to realist theory, the role of international law should be mainly to promote agreements between states. For the liberal theorists, the role may also include the fact that the actors of international law, including the institutions of international sport, incorporate into the rules of international relations norms that they have created and that obviously serve other purposes.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> RESPERGER 2018: 21.

<sup>8</sup> HOFFMAN 2007.

<sup>9</sup> International Olympic Committee 2025: 8.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations [s. a.a].

<sup>11</sup> United Nations [s. a.b].

<sup>12</sup> KISS 2009: 15.

<sup>13</sup> BRUHÁCS et al. 2023: 19.

<sup>14</sup> BRUHÁCS et al. 2023: 29.

## The connections between military science and sports

Parallels between sport and war can be observed in many areas, both at the individual and team levels, and in the preparation and competition phases. Similarities between war and sport can be found particularly in the management of emotions and conflicts, as well as in the intensity of competition. It is partly because of these factors that the rules governing competitions are so important and necessary. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes described human nature as fundamentally selfish, which in its natural state can lead to constant conflict or war. In his research, Aicinena examines Hobbes's approach and uses examples to highlight how the competitive spirit in sport often reflects the characteristics of war. This is the case, for example, when competition sometimes escalates into aggressive or even violent behaviour, similar to conflicts experienced in war. The authors also illustrate, with examples of how cheating, excessive aggression, and even revenge in sports create an environment comparable to the state of constant war described by Hobbes.<sup>15</sup>

The classical theory of just war (*bellum justum*) initially took moral and religious goals into account, such as the defence or propagation of faith. The modern theory of just war and the development of international law are partly grounded in the medieval theory of just war. An essential feature of this theory is that the objectives of a just war are derived from natural law,<sup>16</sup> with religious objectives being pushed into the background and a much greater role being given to the protection of state rights. Hugo Grotius, considered the early father of this theory, dedicated his work on the law of war and peace (*De iure belli ac pacis libri tres*) to Louis XIII. It is regarded as the first systematic work on modern international law. Grotius conceived of a system in which war was governed not only by moral considerations but also by legal ones.<sup>17</sup>

These lessons are particularly relevant in the light of today's global conflicts. The activities of international organisations such as NATO operate within a strict legal framework.

The NATO approach, for example, combines the protection of the civilian population with respect for the principle of proportionality and international humanitarian law,<sup>18</sup> in line with Grotius's thinking, while the international legal approach has remained the basis for cooperation between states.

In addition, NATO incorporates the right to self-defence into its collective defence framework and is committed to ensuring the overall security of all member states.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the positive legal approach remained the basis for cooperation between states. The Grotius approach to natural law can also be applied to sport, namely in the context that sport should be based on moral principles: integrity, fair play and respect for common human nature. However, the regulation of global sporting events (e.g. by the IOC or international sports federations) is essential for

<sup>15</sup> AICINENA 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Natural law is the totality of universal and immutable legal principles that are recognisable by human reason, derive from human nature, and are valid at all times and in all places. It is based on moral order and justice, which are independent of man-made laws and serve as the basis for the moral evaluation of human actions.

<sup>17</sup> BODA 2023.

<sup>18</sup> ATKINSON 2021.

<sup>19</sup> ATKINSON 2021.

the functioning of the international sports system. An excellent example of this is how natural law and positivism are intertwined in certain areas of sport, such as the regulations of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), where the focus is on ensuring equal opportunities and compliance with international standards.

Similar regulations should be extended to other areas of sport, taking into account both moral and legal considerations. One such area is war. The impact of international conflicts on sport also highlights the importance of the relationship between science and ideology in sport. The balance between human values and the rules implemented remain the key to the integrity of international sport.

Rácz's study states that, according to General Valery Gerasimov, Russia's former Chief of General Staff, the role of non-military means in achieving political and strategic goals has increased and often exceeds the power of arms in terms of effectiveness.<sup>20</sup> Sport has a duty to be vigilant and respond to geopolitical events and the ideas of the major players, and to be ready with the appropriate responses to the tools of hybrid warfare affecting sport.

When applying the principles of crisis management advocated by military science to the world of sport, the complexity of conflicts means that sport governance mechanisms must also seek to identify and eliminate the factors that prevent a full 'state of peace' from being achieved. In sport, in fact, all qualified athletes can compete regardless of political, national or other external considerations. To ensure this, the International Olympic Committee must develop a regulatory framework that is clearly based on the principles of non-politics and of equal opportunities. Only then can the true values of sport – performance, fair competition and equal opportunities – be guaranteed.<sup>21</sup>

In the world of sport, the global state of peace creates favourable conditions for athletes, allowing them to prepare and travel unhindered to major world competitions such as the Olympics. In these peace periods, international sporting relations are based on mutual trust and respect for shared sporting values. In contrast, in the event of a possible crisis, the situation could be quite different. In military science, a crisis situation is typically associated with a loss of trust between states or groups of countries. In sport, it can be interpreted as a loss of trust between athletes and international sports organisations. In such a situation, political and economic pressure on sporting organisations, particularly the IOC, could influence decision-making mechanisms, which, in the long run, could jeopardise the equal opportunities of athletes, as well as the integrity of the competition system. For example, the study of Kobierecki and Pigman indicates that the IOC was under significant political pressure from various governments and other sport stakeholders to exclude Russian and Belarusian athletes following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>22</sup> The findings of Schubert demonstrate that the IOC's response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was influenced by geopolitical changes, alongside public outrage that had a substantial impact on the IOC, causing the organisation to ignore its stance on political neutrality.<sup>23</sup> Some countries exerted pressure to exclude the Russian team from the FIFA 24 World Cup

<sup>20</sup> RÁ CZ 2014: 6.

<sup>21</sup> RESPERGER 2018: 4.

<sup>22</sup> KOBIERECKI-PIGMAN 2024.

<sup>23</sup> SCHUBERT 2024.

qualifiers. At the same time, several National Paralympic Committees threatened to boycott the upcoming Beijing Paralympic Games due to the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes.<sup>24</sup>

The aim for the IOC could be to create a stable regulatory environment that will ensure that sport is non-political and equal opportunities are respected in the long term. This environment guarantees that athletes from any country in the world can compete on the basis of their performance alone, regardless of political or geopolitical considerations, in the event of a future global conflict.<sup>25</sup>

The possible unpreparedness of sports organisations for a complex geopolitical crisis, such as war, can cause significant problems for both the competition and the athlete. The experience of military science should be applied, which states that a crisis situation should not take a state by surprise if it is to respond effectively. Resperger describes that this can be ensured by having a well-defined response to the initial signals and the ability to respond to challenges in a timely and appropriate manner with optimised effectiveness.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, hostilities also appear at sporting events. In his book, Resperger details how military science has shown the impact of hostility on human relations. In sport, too, there is a need for more diplomatic empathy, with equality of opportunity and non-hate as binding principles, which should be included in explicit legislation, even at the procedural level.<sup>27</sup>

## IOC policies and regulations in the event of war

### The Olympic truce

In the Olympic Movement, there is an initiative that addresses war as a phenomenon, but it is interesting that it approaches it from the perspective of armistice.

The Greek word for ceasefire (*ekecheiria*) means “the holding of hands” and refers to the stopping of hostilities.<sup>28</sup>

In an area slightly larger than modern Greece, over five hundred city-states shared the land, including Athens, Sparta and Argos. Although they were constantly at war with each other, the city-states sought truces and peace.<sup>29</sup> The tradition of the truce dates back to ancient Greece in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. In the context of the Olympic Games, the Hellenic tradition was meant to ensure that athletes and spectators arrived safely at the games and returned home safely after the Olympics, even if the route passed through enemy territory.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the truces, the games did not always proceed smoothly in ancient times. For example, in 364 BC, after the Arcadians occupied Olympia, they seized control of the games. During the games, however, the Elysians defeated the Arcadians, who then

<sup>24</sup> KOBIERECKI–PIGMAN 2024.

<sup>25</sup> RESPERGER 2018: 6.

<sup>26</sup> RESPERGER 2018: 11.

<sup>27</sup> RESPERGER 2018: 12.

<sup>28</sup> GHOSAL–BANDYOPADHYAY 2017: 277.

<sup>29</sup> NÉMETH 2025.

<sup>30</sup> International Olympic Committee [s. a.a].

fortified the sanctuary with a rampart. The incident ultimately concluded with joint celebrations and a peace treaty, with Olympia returning to Elysian control and the Arcadians withdrawing. Another example is when the Spartans were banned in 420 BC after attacking Elis, who were organising the games.<sup>31</sup> Based on these examples, the Olympic truce, which was born out of noble motives and aimed to protect human life, was not always successful in ancient times.

The highest form of peace agreements in ancient times was *koiné eiréné*, when not only two city-states but all Greek city-states became part of a common, general peace. However, this could only be achieved if a power superior to all of them – through military or political pressure – enforced the agreement. Such a “royal peace” was, for instance, when Artaxerxes, the Persian king, directly dictated the terms of peace to the Greek states at the end of the Corinthian War.<sup>32</sup>

If we symbolically project peace in sport onto athletes, then no athlete should face sanctions for their country's actions. Today, the IOC defines itself as the Supreme Authority in the Olympic Movement<sup>33</sup> and can therefore be seen as a potential player in modern “peace between kings” within the sports system operated by non-governmental bodies.

Based on examples from ancient times, peace is merely a temporary state and cannot be regarded as a permanent phenomenon. For this reason, the truce approach cannot be overly linked to peace, especially if guaranteeing equal rights for athletes is a priority.

“The concept of the Olympic Truce derives from a deep belief that sport and the Olympic Ideals can make their contribution to creating a better and peaceful world.”<sup>34</sup>

The armistice was not revived at the same time as the start of the modern Olympic Games. At the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, a resolution was adopted on compliance with the Olympic Truce. This resolution dates back to 1993 and encourages all Member States to settle their differences peacefully. According to the UN decision, the period of ceasefire starts 7 days before the start of the Olympic Games and lasts until 7 days after the closing of the Games.<sup>35</sup>

The UN General Assembly regularly adopts the resolution “Building a Peaceful and Better World through Sport and the Olympic Ideal” a year before the Winter and Summer Olympics, thus reaffirming the organisation's support for the truce.<sup>36</sup>

For today's Olympic Games and for the Olympic Movement, the Olympic Truce remains a key value, despite the fact that the Olympic Charter does not mention a specific ceasefire and its rules. The Charter states, in its founding principles, that it is “a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity”,<sup>37</sup> and that “the goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better

<sup>31</sup> NÉMETH 2025.

<sup>32</sup> NÉMETH 2025.

<sup>33</sup> International Olympic Committee 2025: 12.

<sup>34</sup> GEORGIADES–SYRIGOS 2009: 17.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations 1993.

<sup>36</sup> United Nations [s. a.c].

<sup>37</sup> International Olympic Committee 2025: 8.

world by educating youth through sport practised in accordance with Olympism and its values".<sup>38</sup> Peace is also manifested in cooperation "with the competent public or private organisations and authorities in the endeavour to place sport at the service of humanity and thereby to promote peace".<sup>39</sup>

In July 2000, the International Olympic Truce Centre was established on the joint initiative of Greece and the IOC, with the mission to "promote the Olympic Ideals, to serve peace and friendship, and to cultivate international understanding".<sup>40</sup> This organisation, however, does not address under what procedures and rules the interests and equal opportunities of athletes are to be protected in the event of a war conflict.

The main purpose of the ancient truce associated with the Olympic Games was to protect the physical safety of athletes and spectators, as well as the safety of individuals. The truce of modern times is much less concrete, and, in some cases, almost elusive. Compared to the ancient Olympic Games, the conflict taking place in the modern world is broader. Sport, and in particular the role of the IOC, can be seen as a patron of peacebuilding, seeking to influence global peace processes through athletes and the UN. While in antiquity, the armistice was actively supported by a smaller number of actors, in the present day, positions around the armistice mobilise a diverse range of stakeholders, either in support or in opposition. The effectiveness of this approach is questionable, based on the examples listed in the article's overview of sports history.

After the First World War, politicians began to use sport as a tool to promote their political ideologies. With the appearance of diplomats in international sporting competitions, sport emerged as adjuncts to foreign policy.<sup>41</sup> The powerful presence of politics in international sport can be a catalyst for threats to sporting actors, including athletes.

Sport and politics are often inseparably linked, regardless of the type of sport or its location. In the period under review here, the influence of geopolitics has often led to boycotts of major sporting events by individual countries. Boycotts and expulsions following conflicts not only send a political message but also have a major impact on the careers of athletes and the global sporting scene. This study did not conduct a detailed analysis of corruption cases within sports, but research in this area could offer valuable and relevant avenues for future research.

In sum, the importance of warfare, in the history of the modern Olympics and still today, is not being given due weight, creating an opportunity to use sport as a soft tool known from hybrid warfare. But what is common is that athletes have never emerged victorious from such situations. In the following section, specific examples will be used to highlight the losses suffered by athletes.

<sup>38</sup> International Olympic Committee 2025: 12.

<sup>39</sup> International Olympic Committee 2025: 13.

<sup>40</sup> The International Olympic Truce Centre [s. a.].

<sup>41</sup> BUCKEL 2008: 1.

## A review of sports history in light of conflicts from the modern Olympics to the present day

The Olympics, one of the world's best-known and most storied sporting events, has in many cases become a tool of political pressure, with the unfortunate result that some events have been boycotted.

The defenders and supporters of sport at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could hardly have imagined that modern sport, in its institutionalised and competitive forms, would become a universal tool of international politics and that sporting competitions would also influence public opinion.<sup>42</sup>

At the Games between 1896 and 1908 (Athens 1896, Paris 1900, St. Louis 1904, London 1908), it was not yet mandatory for the National Olympic Committee (NOC) to nominate competitors, as in the early days most countries did not even have a National Olympic Committee. Athletes could take part in the Games through universities, clubs, or privately. At the 1900 Paris Olympics, many athletes competed on behalf of their clubs, without any national affiliation.<sup>43</sup> After 1912, NOCs started to form gradually and become involved in the developing sports system. The 1955 Olympic Charter already defined the IOC's role, which officially required the participation of NOCs in the nomination process. The IOC's regulations also include the official flag.<sup>44</sup>

The strong political role of sport became really visible after the First World War. An excellent example of this is that, after the IOC had awarded the right to host the 1920 Olympics to the Hungarian capital by a test vote on 20 June 1914, the geopolitical situation following the First World War led the IOC to organise the Olympics in Antwerp instead.<sup>45</sup> Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany and Turkey were not invited to the Antwerp Olympics and were not eligible to participate.<sup>46</sup> In 1924, several countries that had been banned from the previous Olympics were allowed to participate in the Paris Games, but the Germans were not invited in 1924.<sup>47</sup> In 1936, the Berlin Olympics included athletes from 49 countries.<sup>48</sup> However, Hitler's policies kept some American Jewish individual athletes away from the event. It is worth mentioning this because such absences can be evaluated differently, as they are based on an individual decision.<sup>49</sup> The Second World War forced the Olympic movement into a 12-year hiatus.

The first major boycott after the Second World War was at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, when China stayed away from the event for political reasons.<sup>50</sup> Several countries also boycotted the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. The Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland stayed away to express solidarity with the Hungarian people because of the Soviet Union's intervention in the country in 1956, while Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon

<sup>42</sup> RIORDAN-KRÜGER 1999: ix.

<sup>43</sup> VOIGT [s. a.].

<sup>44</sup> International Olympic Committee 1955.

<sup>45</sup> TAKÁCS 2024: 163.

<sup>46</sup> Múlt-kor 2020.

<sup>47</sup> NÉMETH 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Statista Research Department 2024.

<sup>49</sup> TÓTH-SZENESI 2008.

<sup>50</sup> TÓTH-SZENESI 2008.

decided to boycott because of the Suez crisis. The reason for China's absence was that Taiwan was allowed to participate as an independent country.<sup>51</sup>

The Asian Games, the largest multi-sport event on the Asian continent, were held in Jakarta in 1962, and, due to pressure from Arab countries and China, the Indonesian Government refused to issue visas to Israelis and Taiwanese. As a consequence, the IOC sanctioned Indonesia at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. In a political response, the governments of the Southeast Asian Island nations formed the Games of the New Emerging Forces. In response, the IOC announced that it would exclude athletes who had participated in the 1963 Games of the New Emerging Forces in Jakarta. Eventually, China, North Korea and Indonesia sent athletes to the Games of the New Emerging Forces and boycotted the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.<sup>52</sup> Also, starting with the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, South Africa was banned from a number of international sporting events during apartheid in South Africa. This ban remained in place until the Barcelona Olympics.<sup>53</sup>

The subsequent events did not remain undisturbed either. A total of 22 African nations boycotted the 1976 Montreal Olympics.<sup>54</sup> In 1968, at the Mexico City Games, the IOC still refused to allow the Republic of South Africa to participate in the Games.<sup>55</sup>

Undoubtedly the best-known boycott events include the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. In total, 65 countries boycotted the 1980 Games. The reason for the abstention was to protest against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> In response to the 1984 Olympics, four years later, the Soviet Union and several of its allies decided to boycott the Games.<sup>57</sup> For those who stayed away, a 'substitute' competition was organised in 1984, namely the Friendship Games, which were held in 9 countries in the summer of 1984.<sup>58</sup>

The Commonwealth Games is a major multinational sporting event, which has been held regularly since 1930.<sup>59</sup> The 1986 Games in Edinburgh were a clear low point in the history of the competition. The event was boycotted by 32 countries because Margaret Thatcher refused to impose sanctions on South Africa because of its apartheid policies.<sup>60</sup>

Prior to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, North Korea's demand to co-host the Games with South Korea was not met. After that, North Korea and some of its allies, including Cuba, Ethiopia and Nicaragua, boycotted the Seoul Games.<sup>61</sup> North Korea later stayed away from the 2021 Tokyo Olympics because of the Covid pandemic.<sup>62</sup>

In the years preceding the 1992 Olympic Games, the collapse of the Soviet Union significantly affected sport. After Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia's Olympic committees

<sup>51</sup> ACKERMANN 2016.

<sup>52</sup> NELSEN 2021.

<sup>53</sup> International Olympic Committee 2018.

<sup>54</sup> International Olympic Committee 2024.

<sup>55</sup> KAPROS-RESPERGER 2023: 139.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of State [s. a.].

<sup>57</sup> L. PAP 2024.

<sup>58</sup> SZEGŐ 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Commonwealth Sport [s. a.].

<sup>60</sup> ALLAN 2020.

<sup>61</sup> NELSEN 2021.

<sup>62</sup> BBC 2021.

were readmitted to the Olympic Movement at the end of 1991, all conditions were set for their athletes to compete. In February 1992, the NOCs of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine received provisional recognition in order to participate in the Games with their own national team.<sup>63</sup>

In 1992, the UN Security Council's sanctions, adopted on 30 May, included a ban on sporting relations with Yugoslavia in response to the country's military aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>64</sup> The same year "the IOC launched an Appeal for the observance of the Olympic Truce and negotiated with the United Nations to facilitate the participation of athletes of the former Republic of Yugoslavia in the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona".<sup>65</sup> As a result of the negotiations, led by then IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch, athletes from Serbia and Montenegro were not allowed to represent Yugoslavia but had the chance to compete as Independent Olympic Participants under the Olympic flag and Olympic anthem.<sup>66</sup> Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina competed as new NOCs.<sup>67</sup>

The former Portuguese colony of East Timor was occupied by Indonesia after the Portuguese withdrew. Although the 1999 independence referendum was successful, it tragically triggered further violence by pro-Jakarta militias, leading to many deaths and a mass exodus of refugees, including athletes. Therefore, it is especially noteworthy that East Timorese athletes were permitted to take part in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, competing as Independent Olympic Athletes (IOA) under the Olympic flag. This arrangement was a rare exception, as the Olympic Charter usually requires athletes to be affiliated with a National Olympic Committee, which did not yet exist in East Timor.<sup>68</sup> At the same event, Afghan athletes were banned from competition due to the Taliban regime's discrimination against women and its prohibition of sport.<sup>69</sup>

Two months before the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, the IOC Executive Board (IOC EB) decided to temporarily suspend the Iraqi National Olympic Committee. The reason given was that the Iraqi Government in power continuously interfered in the Iraqi sports movement. The Iraqi Council of Ministers suspended the Iraqi National Olympic Committee and its member federations, then appointed an interim committee chaired by the Minister of Sport. This decision violated the autonomy of the Iraqi NOC.<sup>70</sup> The eligibility of Iraqi athletes was uncertain, albeit for a short period, and eventually those who qualified were allowed to participate in the Olympic Games.<sup>71</sup>

The Georgian–Russian war of August 2008 was triggered by long-standing tensions in the region. South Ossetia and Abkhazia had been seeking independence since the break-up of the Soviet Union, and Georgia was displaying an ambition for closer cooperation with NATO. The direction of the two factors and the chance of

<sup>63</sup> International Olympic Committee 1992: 3.

<sup>64</sup> United Nations 1992.

<sup>65</sup> International Olympic Committee [s. a. b].

<sup>66</sup> Los Angeles Times 1992.

<sup>67</sup> International Olympic Committee 2022b.

<sup>68</sup> BARKER 2020.

<sup>69</sup> ABC News 2000.

<sup>70</sup> International Olympic Committee 2008a.

<sup>71</sup> International Olympic Committee 2008b.

both happening would have led to a power shift in the territory, threatening Russia's role in the region, and leading to the escalation of the conflict. The war ended with a ceasefire agreement, but it has since been a frozen conflict.<sup>72</sup>

Hundreds of people were killed or injured during the 5-day war between Russia and Georgia.<sup>73</sup> During the conflict, military and civilian airfields on the outskirts of Tbilisi were also hit by Russian bombs.<sup>74</sup> The conflict coincided with the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, which began on 8 August. During the war, the world sports governing bodies took no position and athletes from neither of the parties involved were penalised or sanctioned.

It is worth noting that athlete Guor Marial was granted special permission to compete in 2012. The South Sudanese refugee marathon runner was allowed to participate in the London Olympics as an Independent Olympic Athlete (IOA) and compete under the Olympic flag. The IOC officially recognised the South Sudanese National Olympic Committee in 2015. As a result, the country's athletes competed under their own flag at the 2016 Rio Games.<sup>75</sup>

During the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, anti-government protests broke out in Kiev that resulted in the deaths of dozens of people. In response to the events, Ukrainian athletes wanted to compete with black armbands, but the IOC refused to allow them to do so.<sup>76</sup>

This was followed by the conflict over Crimea, in 2014, which some see as an early sign of the Russian–Ukrainian war. The Russian annexation of Crimea has not been recognised by the vast majority of countries and international organisations, including the UN,<sup>77</sup> which has condemned the events that took place. The Russian Olympic Committee (ROC), according to its website, considers the Olympic Council of the Republic of Crimea and the Olympic Council of Sevastopol as members, as of December 2016.<sup>78</sup> The Crimean conflict itself did not result in collective sanctions by the IOC at the subsequent Olympics.

The state-sponsored Russian doping scandal that emerged after the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi created significant difficulties and controversy while preparing for the 2016 Rio Olympics. Just 12 days before the commencement of the 2016 Rio Olympics, the IOC EB implemented strict conditions on Russian athletes. These included that only athletes who had proven they had not been involved in a state-sponsored doping programme were allowed to participate. The ROC could not enter any athletes who had previously been sanctioned, regardless of whether they had served their suspension. As part of the oversight mechanism, each international federation conducted eligibility checks, which had to be approved by arbitrators appointed by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). At the end of the procedure,

<sup>72</sup> BENES 2018.

<sup>73</sup> CNN 2025.

<sup>74</sup> France 24 2008.

<sup>75</sup> International Olympic Committee 2015a.

<sup>76</sup> GROHMANN 2014.

<sup>77</sup> United Nations 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Russian Olympic Committee [s. a.].

a three-member IOC committee issued the final licenses.<sup>79</sup> Both individual and team athletes competed in the Games as representatives of Russia.<sup>80</sup>

In October 2015, the IOC suspended the Kuwaiti National Olympic Committee (KOC)<sup>81</sup> due to government interference, and the country's athletes competed under the name "Independent Olympic Athletes (IOA)" under the Olympic flag. Thanks to the performance of Fehaid Al Deehani, the Games saw the first gold medal in IOA colours in history.<sup>82</sup>

At the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, Russian athletes eventually competed as Olympic Athletes from Russia (OAR), under a strict set of procedures. However, the reason for the sanctions was not the events in Crimea, but the state-sponsored Russian doping scandal following the Sochi Olympics.<sup>83</sup> (Due to length limitations, the article does not cover the doping scandal in depth.) In the case of the 2022 Russian–Ukrainian conflict, a completely different scenario has been realised, which is described in detail later in this article.

Before the 2018 Winter Olympics, it was still a question whether North Korea would participate. But the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang became a sporting diplomatic success story when North Korea and South Korea jointly marched in the opening ceremony. To mark the occasion, they fielded a joint women's ice hockey team.<sup>84</sup> The joint sports and Olympic Games provided a temporary opportunity to improve diplomatic relations and ease tensions.

After WADA banned Russia for four years from participating in major international sporting events, including the Olympics,<sup>85</sup> the parties continued negotiations in the negotiating room. In the WADA v. Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) case, the CAS decision of 17 December 2020, partially upheld RUSADA's appeal and reduced the sanctions duration to two years. At the same time, it confirmed that Russian athletes may only participate in international competitions in a neutral status.<sup>86</sup> In Tokyo, both individual and team athletes ultimately competed under the banner of the Russian National Olympic Committee.<sup>87</sup> They participated in several team sports<sup>88</sup> at the Games, including women's water polo<sup>89</sup> and volleyball.<sup>90</sup>

After North Korea decided not to participate in the Tokyo Games due to the pandemic, the IOC imposed a ban on the North Korean NOC, which lasted until the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.<sup>91</sup> The IOC's decision was based on the fact that North Korea's failure to send athletes to the Games constituted a breach of the Olympic Charter in force at that time, which explicitly requires the participation of the nation's

<sup>79</sup> International Olympic Committee 2016b.

<sup>80</sup> International Olympic Committee 2016a.

<sup>81</sup> International Olympic Committee 2015b.

<sup>82</sup> Association of National Olympic Committees 2016.

<sup>83</sup> International Olympic Committee 2017.

<sup>84</sup> International Olympic Committee 2021a.

<sup>85</sup> SMITH–BODNER 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Court of Arbitration for Sport 2020.

<sup>87</sup> International Olympic Committee 2021b.

<sup>88</sup> International Olympic Committee 2020b.

<sup>89</sup> International Olympic Committee 2020c.

<sup>90</sup> International Olympic Committee 2020d.

<sup>91</sup> EVANS 2021.

Olympic team.<sup>92</sup> The IOC finally permitted athletes to take part in the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing in neutral colours, but no athletes from North Korea showed up.<sup>93</sup> North Koreans attributed their absence to the pandemic and “hostile forces”.<sup>94</sup> (Due to space constraints, the article does not deal with the pandemic in detail. However, the authors believe that, as with the issues of war and sport, a procedure should be developed as part of future research to address such health security challenges.)

The United States announced a diplomatic boycott ahead of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. According to the U.S. Biden Administration, China was pursuing policies amounting to genocide and crimes against humanity against millions of Uighurs and other, mainly Muslim, minority groups. The diplomatic boycott was joined by Lithuania, New Zealand, Scotland, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Lithuania, Estonia, Belgium, Austria, Japan, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and the Czech Republic.<sup>95</sup> During a diplomatic boycott, government representatives of the country concerned do not participate in the international event, but athletes do. In this way, the political message is still being conveyed, but it is more beneficial for the athletes, as they retain their opportunity to compete.

## The impact of the Russian–Ukrainian war on sports regulations

According to Clausewitz, “war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means”.<sup>96</sup> The outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine has shaken the international sporting world, affecting thousands of athletes and many sports. Just four days after the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Russia committed acts of aggression against Ukraine, in violation of the Olympic Truce, which was still in effect.<sup>97</sup> As part of the management of the conflict situation, the IOC has proposed a ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes, reflecting its commitment to peace. This move was made in violation of the Olympic Truce declared during times of armed conflict. However, the measure is contrary to one of the fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter adopted by the IOC, namely the point in the Olympic Principles that defines the objectives of the Olympic movement, and the ethical standards associated with it.

A few days after Russia attacked Ukraine, the IOC made the following recommendation on 28 February 2022: “In order to protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants, the IOC EB recommends that International Sports Federations and sports event organisers not invite or allow the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international competitions.”<sup>98</sup> With this decision, the IOC went against its own Olympic Charter and against the interests of the athletes.

<sup>92</sup> International Olympic Committee 2020a: 60.

<sup>93</sup> HOUSTON 2022.

<sup>94</sup> SMITH 2022.

<sup>95</sup> FENG 2021.

<sup>96</sup> CLAUSEWITZ 1976: 69.

<sup>97</sup> DURKEE 2022.

<sup>98</sup> International Olympic Committee 2022a.

The IOC's recommendation led to divisions, with some welcoming it and others describing it as discriminatory and contrary to the Olympic Charter. The recommendation was overturned almost a year later, after lengthy discussions, with the IOC proposing that athletes holding Russian or Belarusian passports should be allowed to compete in neutral colours, with the addition that active supporters and participants in the war should not be allowed to enter at all.<sup>99</sup> Under the proposal, Russian and Belarusian athletes could also qualify for qualifying events in competitions organised by national sports federations.

The temporary sanctions imposed in 2022 on Russian and Belarusian athletes have also exposed the IOC to political manoeuvring, calling into question the political credibility of the IOC's truce and its peace efforts. It would be important for the IOC to determine what role it wishes to play in times of war conflict, and what its priorities are in terms of its role in promoting peace or protecting athletes.

The IOC's recommendations are made towards all members, but it is up to various representative organisations to decide what and how to incorporate them into their own practices. This may result in different rules for different sports.

Unlike many other sports, tennis players receive a lot of media attention throughout the year. This is due to many factors, including the popularity of the game. On 1 March 2022, following the outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine, the international organisations in charge of operating tennis issued a joint statement of their position. Signatories of the joint statement included the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and the International Tennis Federation (ITF), which is recognised by the IOC as the governing body of world tennis, and the organisers of the four grand slam events (Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon and US Open). In this statement, the WTA and ATP Boards of Directors condemned the actions of Russia and Belarus, which resulted in the suspension of Russian and Belarusian tennis players from international team events and the cancellation of tournaments in Russia and Belarus, but allowed individual players to continue to compete internationally, without their national symbols.<sup>100</sup> As a result of the swift and joint decision, Russian and Belarusian athletes were not discriminated against as individual athletes because of their origin.

After this, the biggest Grand Slam tournament in history, the Wimbledon tennis championship, gave in to pressure from the British Government and decided, in April 2022, not to allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to participate in the July Grand Slam.<sup>101</sup> The LTA (Lawn Tennis Association) blamed the British Government for the decision.<sup>102</sup> The WTA, representing professional women's tennis players, expressed disappointment and issued a statement saying that no athlete should be discriminated against because of their origin or the decisions of their government.<sup>103</sup> The ATP, the professional organisation representing men's tennis players, called the decision

<sup>99</sup> International Olympic Committee 2023a.

<sup>100</sup> WTA 2022a.

<sup>101</sup> PAVITT 2022a.

<sup>102</sup> PAVITT 2022b.

<sup>103</sup> WTA 2022b.

unfair and expressed concern that such an action could set a precedent in tennis.<sup>104</sup> As the decision of the Wimbledon organisers was not compatible with ATP principles, the 2022 Wimbledon Tennis Championships were not allowed to award ATP ranking points.<sup>105</sup> Like the ATP, the WTA has not awarded ranking points to women. The 2023 Wimbledon Championships then allowed Russian and Belarusian players to participate as neutral athletes.<sup>106</sup>

Ahead of the World Athletics Championships in Budapest, in 2023, a press statement in March confirmed the earlier decision that Russian and Belarusian athletes would not be allowed to compete even under a neutral flag.<sup>107</sup> As a result, Russian and Belarusian athletes were not allowed to participate in the World Championships in Budapest. The President of World Athletics, Lord Sebastian Coe, did not follow the IOC's guidelines and made his position clear when he stated that "I am not a neutral".<sup>108</sup> His statement was also contrary to the principles of the Olympic Charter.

On 8 March 2022, the World Aquatics governing body decided to exclude Russian and Belarusian athletes from all competitions.<sup>109</sup> Following the decision of this organisation governing the sport of swimming, Russian and Belarusian athletes were not even allowed to compete in neutral colours at the 2022 World Championships in Budapest.<sup>110</sup> However, after extensive consultation, the organisation amended the regulation on 4 September 2023, to allow Russian and Belarusian individual athletes to compete under a neutral flag.<sup>111</sup>

Although the IOC typically provides guidelines, there are also examples of specific interventions in the rules of a sporting federation. In 2023, Ukrainian fencer Olga Kharlan was disqualified from the World Championships in Milan. The reason behind the disqualification was that, after winning her match, she refused to shake hands with a Russian fencer who was participating under a neutral flag at the time. The IOC stepped in and assured the Ukrainian fencer that "she will have a place at the Paris Olympics next year [...]".<sup>112</sup> President Thomas Bach wrote in a letter to Kharlan that there will be a "unique exception" and assured her that she will be able to compete in Paris.<sup>113</sup> His move could be considered a political decision. Bach's actions may look like a sympathetic gesture, but it has a drawback in that they undermine the element of fair play, namely that it is vital in sport that athletes from all nations have equal opportunities and obey the same rules.

At a meeting in January 2023, Astrid Jacobsen, a Norwegian Olympic gold medalist in cross-country skiing who is also a doctor and a member of the IOC Athletes' Commission, proposed that Russian and Belarusian athletes should compete under a neutral flag in international competitions. Jacobson came under heavy criticism from

<sup>104</sup> WILLIAMS 2022.

<sup>105</sup> Fox Sports 2022.

<sup>106</sup> HENRY 2023.

<sup>107</sup> World Athletics 2023.

<sup>108</sup> ROWBOTTOM 2023.

<sup>109</sup> FINA 2022.

<sup>110</sup> BYRNES 2022.

<sup>111</sup> World Aquatics 2023.

<sup>112</sup> DUNBAR 2023.

<sup>113</sup> DUNBAR 2023.

both athletes and politicians.<sup>114</sup> The hate directed towards her led to her resignation from the Commission at the end of 2023. Despite facing considerable opposition, the decision-makers finally approved the idea of allowing Russian and Belarusian individual athletes to compete under a neutral flag at the Paris Olympics.<sup>115</sup>

On 5 October 2023, the Russian Olympic Committee decided to admit to its membership the regional sports organisations (namely Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhya) that fall under the jurisdiction of the National Olympic Committee of Ukraine. Following this decision, the IOC suspended the Russian Olympic Committee with immediate effect, stating that their move “constitutes a breach of the Olympic Charter because it violates the territorial integrity of the NOC of Ukraine, as recognised by the International Olympic Committee”.<sup>116</sup>

Referring back to the 2014–2015 Crimea conflict, the IOC did not impose sanctions for the admission of Crimea and Sevastopol, but intervened after the admission of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhya. As regards the eligibility of athletes to compete, the IOC’s previous position and recommendations of 28 March 2023, remain valid.

On 8 December 2023, the sports world’s long-awaited decision was made when the IOC EB approved the eligibility of athletes with Russian and Belarusian passports to compete in the 2024 Paris Olympics under strict conditions. The decision allowed individual athletes to compete in neutral colours, with the detailed conditions set out in the previous guidelines for IFs and organisers of international sporting events issued on 28 March.<sup>117</sup> The organisation of individual neutral athletes (AIN) who had qualified for the Games and their support staff (registration, accreditation, etc.), as well as their participation in the sports competitions, was coordinated jointly by the organiser of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, the relevant international sports federation and the IOC.<sup>118</sup>

During this period, in addition to the Russian–Ukrainian war, another major geopolitical event, the Israeli–Palestinian war happened. The event that started as a result of a terrorist attack also raised the issue of the participation of athletes from the countries concerned in world competitions. In their case, the IOC opted for non-discrimination and did not impose sanctions on any athlete.<sup>119</sup>

While a total of 333 Russian athletes competed at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, the 2024 Paris Games saw a drastically lower turnout. Only 15 Russian and 17 Belarusian athletes were present.<sup>120</sup>

In February 2025, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) declared that “it is not yet safe to reintegrate the Russian and Belarusian National and Club Teams to its championships for the 2025–2026 season”.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>114</sup> LANTOS 2024.

<sup>115</sup> International Olympic Committee 2023a.

<sup>116</sup> International Olympic Committee 2023b.

<sup>117</sup> International Olympic Committee 2023c.

<sup>118</sup> International Olympic Committee 2023d: 2.

<sup>119</sup> SALGUERO 2023.

<sup>120</sup> LEPELTIER 2025.

<sup>121</sup> International Ice Hockey Federation 2025.

Just a month and a half after the IIHF's season-long ban, the sport is moving in a hopeful direction. While peace talks between the United States and Russia over Ukraine are intensifying, sport could play a role in the process. The idea of a professional hockey match between the U.S. and Russia was suggested by Vladimir Putin and has also won the approval of U.S. President Donald Trump.<sup>122</sup> If the proposed National Hockey League (NHL) and Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) star matches come to fruition, it could set a real example for sports organisations that have sanctioned innocent athletes with bans for war.<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

Although sport aims to maintain its independence, history has demonstrated that geopolitical events often negatively affect sporting competitions, with particularly enduring consequences for athletes' equal opportunities to participate.

Given the current global conflicts, it is essential for sport to establish a system that guarantees equal opportunities for athletes in all circumstances. If this does not occur, the negative effects on athletes' lives could eventually erode faith and hope in the Olympic ideal.

It is important for sport to present a unified image and to adhere to the principles that make the Olympic Movement so appealing to many people. Violations of these principles could undermine the organisation's genuine commitment to prioritising athletes as the heart of the movement and following the Charter.

Fair, apolitical and comprehensive regulation that must be followed, even in times conflicts, can be the answer to curbing power imbalances by closing regulatory gaps and fine-tuning existing rules. The IOC has a particularly significant role in developing new regulations that properly address the risks involved in sport. Regulations must encompass all areas where a crisis or war impacts sport, aligning with the community's desire to guide sport in this direction. The finding in this study suggests several areas for further investigation.

Our study clearly shows how a wide range of complex, interrelated factors can influence the Olympic Games. These influences can affect not only the event organisation but also the IOC, the owner of the rights to the Games. It can pose risks to a host country and to all entering athletes, with significant consequences. In order to ensure the most comprehensive preparation and highest level security before and during an Olympics, cooperation is needed between the military, including its special forces unit, as well as Law Enforcement Agencies, the Counter-Terrorism Centre (TEK) and Civil National Security Services<sup>124</sup> (the Information Office, the Constitution Protection Office, the National Security Service, National Information Centre) and the Military National Security Office.

<sup>122</sup> Reuters 2025.

<sup>123</sup> Mandiner 2025.

<sup>124</sup> Civil National Security Services [s. a.].

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## Abbreviations

- AIN – Individual Neutral Athletes  
ATP – Association of Tennis Professionals  
CAS – Court of Arbitration for Sport  
EU – European Union  
FIFA – Fédération Internationale de Football Association  
IOA – Independent Olympic Athlete  
IOC – International Olympic Committee  
IOC EB – International Olympic Committee Executive Board  
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation  
ROC – Russian Olympic Committee  
RUSADA – Russian Anti-Doping Agency  
UN – United Nations  
WADA – World Anti-Doping Agency  
WTA – Women's Tennis Association