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## **INTERNATIONAL FUNCTIONS OF SPORT (BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE BALTIC STATES)**

**ABSTRACT:** The topic of this article is the function of sport in Russia's bilateral relations with the Baltic States. The author attempts to define the goals which the Russian Federation wants to accomplish by using sport as a 'soft power' in relations with the Baltic States. The concept of the article is based on an analysis of three forms of sport politicisation described in the subject literature – as a collector (a carrier of certain values or ideas), a catalyst (a factor initiating processes or events) and a facilitator (the means facilitating communication and understanding). The examples provided as an illustration of the theses relate to the events that took place from 2002 to 2018. The source material consists predominantly of information obtained from online information portals, such as Delfi, RIA, Nowosti and Postimees. The analysis has showed that, in its relations with the Baltic States, Russia tries to use sport to strengthen its position and improve its image internationally. It also attempts to implement a historical policy at sporting events as well as use sporting rivalry as a demonstration of its power.

**KEYWORDS:** Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, soft power, sport, international relations

### **Introduction**

Since ancient Greece, considered to be the homeland of sport, the role of public sporting rivalry has gone far beyond the field of physical fitness – the Greek Games strengthened the sense of unity, boosted the circulation of ideas, provided an opportunity to meet, manifest wealth and enhance the prestige.

There is also an obvious political context in contemporary international sport: athletes enter the arena to the sounds of the national anthems, under the flag of their country, and, in the case of victory, the ranking of their country increases. In other words, modern sport is becoming a political (and often geopolitical) instrument of "soft power" (Yudina 2017, 196).

Moreover, it should be noted that in recent decades, sport has become professionalised, commercialised and institutionalised, becoming part of mass culture and an industry geared towards meeting the need for entertainment. Globalisation

has also contributed to giving it a more symbolic dimension – for instance, as a way of maintaining national and regional distinctiveness. For this reason, sport attracts the interest of states and corporations (Karczewski 2012, 12).

In international relations, sport can play both a positive and a negative role. Unfortunately, its attractiveness can be used, among other reasons, to incite hatred (ethnic, political or religious), to escalate nationalist and chauvinistic feelings, to achieve selfish political goals or to prove the “superiority” (of a country, nation, social, political or economic system) (Oreshkin 2009, 6-7; Kobierecki 2013, 52; Cha 2016, 139, 144-146).

After analysing the literature on the subject, Maciej Karczewski, distinguished three basic forms of the politicisation of sport:

- sport as a “collector”, i.e., a reservoir and a carrier of values and ideals of a political nature (e.g. creating a positive image of the People’s Republic of China by organising large sporting events);
- sport as a “catalyst” that may be a factor accelerating or initiating certain processes and events in the political sphere (e.g. The “Football War” between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969);
- sport as a “facilitator”, hence a means that actively contributes to the process of communication between participants of international relations (e.g. “Cricket for Peace”, an initiative from 1987 which reduced tension between India and Pakistan (Karczewski 2012, 14).

All the aforementioned forms of the politicisation of sport may be found in the relations between Russia and the Baltic States. This sketch is an attempt to define the goals that Moscow wants to accomplish by using sport as a “soft power” in its relations with the Baltic States. The examples provided serve as an illustration of the theses relates to the events of 2002-2018.

The cooperation between Russia and the Baltic States in the field of physical culture and sport is carried out on the basis of bilateral agreements between the Russian State Committee for Physical Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Departments of Culture and Sports of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The presence of the legal framework allows, among other things, for participation in tournaments organised by one of the parties, or for annual sporting events such as the Community Cup football tournament held in Moscow every year since 1993, in which teams from post-Soviet countries, including Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, take part (Ivanova 2018, 163).

## 1. Sport as a “collector”

If we look at sport as a “collector”, i.e., a carrier of certain political ideas, it can certainly become an instrument of support for Russia’s historical policy. One of Russia’s aims is to weaken the international position of the Baltic States and one of the ways is to present them as states ‘glorifying Nazism’. Another issue is the constant rejection of the occupation of the Baltic States as well as accusations of alleged discrimination against the Russian minority living there (Letko 2018).

The greatest tensions in Russian-Estonian relations in terms of sport are generated by football matches. In March 2002, in Tallinn, after an unexpected defeat of Russia in a friendly match, Russian fans stormed into the host sectors and forced the police to intervene (26 people were detained). However, even if that incident could be regarded as an act of hooliganism, one of the banners displayed during the match that said: “The hosts are back” has been firmly embedded in the memory of Estonians<sup>1</sup>. Four years later, in March 2006, more than 550 police officers and over 160 private security guards ensured safety and order during and after the match – 10 times more than when securing other events of this sort (apart from the Russia-Estonia match that took place in October of that year in St. Petersburg which had over 2,000 police officers providing security). According to some Russian journalists, the Estonian media were interested not so much in the sports side of the event and who would win, but rather in the non-sporting aspect. It was stressed that the Russian fans may have been offended because upon entering the stadium with a visa and ticket, they were instructed that individuals with firearms, alcohol, drugs or psychotropic substances or banners promoting any kind of discrimination (ranging from ethnic to sexual) would not be allowed into the stands. “You come as a guest, yet you are warned at the doorstep not to spit on your neighbour’s plate, not to blow one’s nose into one’s bare hand and not to pee next to the toilet”<sup>2</sup> (Bogomolov 2005).

The qualifying match for Euro 2008, which was to take place on 24 March 2007 in Tallinn, was, therefore, awaited in a tense atmosphere. After the Estonian Parliament passed an act on the liquidation of “forbidden constructions” (including those glorifying the Soviet occupation of Estonia) on 15 February 2007, allowing for the removal of monuments of Soviet soldiers, including the Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn, Russia became infuriated with Estonia.

In this situation, the match could become an additional trigger. On the eve of the game, the head of the Russian Fans’ union, Yuri Davidov, announced that Russian fans would lay flowers at the monument which should not cause the hosts

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rian.ru/society> (accessed 26.02.2006).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rian.ru> (accessed 16.10.2005).

to react negatively<sup>3</sup>. Estonian fans' representative, Frank Kolde confirmed these words, noting that even if there were "clashes", they would take place on the street, not at the stadium. Additional patrols were sent to the streets of Tallinn, particularly to the area around the monument<sup>4</sup>.

More than a thousand Russian fans travelled to Tallinn. About 70 of them failed to obtain an Estonian visa, which Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, called the Estonian government's attempt to politicise this sporting event. In his view, the Estonians also confiscated Russian flags at the border<sup>5</sup>.

On the day of the match, numerous groups of Russian fans were laid flowers at the monument. That day went without any incidents, but, the day after, one of the Russian fans unfolded a banner at the monument with the inscription: "Hands off from the Liberator-Soldier". A police officer on duty in the area ordered the banner to be taken away and then tried to roll it up. As a consequence, the scuffles erupted and an officer used tear gas, which resulted in seven injuries<sup>6</sup>.

On 24 and 25 March, several Russian fans were arrested in Tallinn, and the following year they were added to the so-called blacklist of people who were banned from entering Estonia.

Other types of problems occurred during sport meetings between the Latvian and Russian national teams. About a thousand Russian fans attended the World Cup qualifying match on August 17, 2005 in Riga, who, even after being supported by Russian-speaking fans from Latvia, were a minority at the stadium. The visitors' sector was cut off from the rest of the stadium, and security was ensured by police officers and 50 anti-terrorists. There were no major incidents, but, after the match (which ended in a draw), the captain of the Latvian team Vitālijs Astafjevs said that before the game, the Russians had attempted to bribe the Latvian footballers and activists<sup>7</sup> (Krievija 2005).

Of course, a scandal broke out – the President of the Russian Football Union, Vitaly Mutko described these words as a provocation and announced that this matter would be clarified with the Latvian Football Federation. At the same time, he made it clear that if the Astafjev's allegations were not confirmed, the RFU would do everything it could to ensure that the Latvian player would no longer play for the Russian club Ruby Kazan. Vladimir Bauer, the Vice-President of RFU did not rule out the political aspect of the whole issue, which could only be a prelude to a higher-level conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://sport.rian.ru> (accessed 16.08.2007).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.postimees.ee> (accessed 15.04.2007).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gazeta.ru> (accessed 24.04.2007).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rian.ru> (accessed 17.08.2007).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.delfi.lv> (accessed 15.10.2010).

Guntis Indriksons, the President of the LFF quickly denied suggestions of the Latvian footballer. Astafjevs himself also apologised for the confusion that had erupted around his words. According to him, this was the result of a misinterpretation – when asked whether he had heard about rumours of corruption, he claimed that he had answered that the Latvian team was playing fair and all the rest was simply an over-interpretation by journalists<sup>8</sup>.

In May 2006, the Ice Hockey World Championship tournament was held in Riga. The entire Russian team, decorated with ribbons of St. George, laid flowers at the Monument of Soviet Army Soldiers on May 9th. That was a clear manifestation of support for the official Russian historical policy – which considers the occupation of Latvia as “liberation”. Meanwhile, for the Latvian authorities and the majority of Riga’s residents, the entry of the Red Army was the beginning of another occupation, and the Monument of the Soviet soldiers is a symbol of enslavement. The presence of Russian athletes could also be perceived as support for those demonstrating that day at the Veterans Monument. As team coach Vladimir Krikunov said: “There are young people in our team and we should remember about the patriotic upbringing of our growing generation”<sup>9</sup>.

Undoubtedly, sport is also a carrier of the idea of Russia’s greatness and power, which is why sporting rivalry is taken very seriously and ambitiously there. On 26 March 2016, Russia defeated Lithuania 3:0 in a friendly match, but the subsequent shameful defeats against Costa Rica and Qatar caused the players to be criticised by President Putin, who stated in one of the interviews: “Our team has not been great for a long time”. These words were also quoted during the Duma meeting to illustrate the tragic situation of Russian football<sup>10</sup>.

## **2. Sport as a “catalyst”**

In Russia’s relations with the Baltic States, it is also possible to point out situations in which sport has become a ‘catalyst’, speeding up or initiating certain processes and events in the political sphere.

When, on 10 May 2009, the Russian team defended its title as the Ice Hockey World Champion, its young supporters carrying Russian flags took to the streets of Riga. Cars decorated in Russia’s national colours were spotted circulating the streets of the Latvian capital. Those and other events led to extremely negative reactions from some groups – in May, the online campaign “Go home” was launched by the “Defenders of Latvia and the Language” (braucmajas.lv).

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.delfi.lv> (accessed 16.10.2010).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rian.ru> (accessed 16.05.2006).

<sup>10</sup> <http://api.duma.gov.ru> (accessed 19.02.2020).

The nightmare of 9 May and the days after Russia's victory [in the World Hockey Championship] showed what politicians, political scientists and social activists are hiding – a Latvia inhabited by foreign, disloyal and hostile people who consider Latvia's independence a short-term mistake. Russian flags and ribbons of St. George remind us at every turn that there are dangerous and aggressive individuals among us. With our signatures, we address those to whom Latvia is a foreign land. It is not your country and not your land, so go home.

Until 20 May, this initiative had been supported by approximately 3,400 people<sup>11</sup>. Another example is a special website ([www.latvietislatvija.com/AUTO](http://www.latvietislatvija.com/AUTO)), which contains car registration numbers (as well as data on their owners) which were decorated with “ribbons of St. George” or Russian flags<sup>12</sup>.

The next violent Russian-Lithuanian conflict, which not only affected the sports federations of both countries but also spread to international (sports and political) domains, was caused by the prominent Lithuanian pentathlete Donata Rimšaitė (a World Vice-Champion), who declared at the end of 2010 that she would apply for the Russian citizenship and wished to represent her new homeland. As a reason, she mentioned the crisis, which she believed the Lithuanian sport was plunging into and the better financial conditions that were offered to her in Russia, as well as her relationship with the Russian athlete Dmitry Suslov<sup>13</sup>. The Russians were unlikely to expect any difficulties, hoping that the Lithuanians would take into account the case of Yulia Koliogova, who, for personal reasons, accepted Lithuanian citizenship two and a half years earlier without any objections from the Modern Pentathlon Federation of Russia<sup>14</sup>. However, the Lithuanian Union of Modern Pentathlons and the Lithuanian National Olympic Committee rejected the Russian's request for a player to be able to take part in international competitions, including the 2012 London Olympics, before the three-year grace period provided for by the Olympic Charter for players changing national colours expires. The President of RFU, Vyacheslav Aminov, spoke personally to representatives of the LFF and the International Union of Modern Pentathlon. He managed to obtain permission for Rimšaitė to perform for Russia at the European and World Championships and in the World Cup, but he did not achieve the most important thing – the door to the Games remained closed. The Lithuanians did not intend to give in and facilitate the Russian side's task, despite veiled threats that the deterioration of relations between the national unions could have a negative impact on the training opportunities for the remaining Lithuanian pentathletes in Russia<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.telegraf.lv> (accessed 30.05.2009).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.rian.ru> (accessed 04.02.2010).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bolshoisport.ru> (accessed 13.07.2018).

<sup>14</sup> <http://sport.rian.ru> (accessed 21.01.2012).

<sup>15</sup> <http://sport.rian.ru> (accessed 3.08.2011).

Over time, the situation became increasingly tense. Russian sports activists began to suggest the politicisation of an issue which, in their opinion, had already been orally agreed upon at the end of 2010. Aminov directly accused the Lithuanian government, which presented an anti-Russian stance of forcing the LFF to change its decision<sup>16</sup>.

In 2012, the Russians again tried to intervene in the International Olympic Committee. However, the year-long negotiations involving the Chairman of the Russian Olympic Committee, Alexander Zhukov, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, ended in failure<sup>17</sup>. The Russian minister also spoke to his Lithuanian counterpart on this matter, and, as it turns out, without any success<sup>18</sup>.

### **3. Sport as a “facilitator”**

Surely, Russia is also capable of using sport as a facilitator, which could support the process of the normalisation of relations with the Baltic States, and simultaneously strengthen Russia’s position. At a time when these relations at the political level are openly confrontational and when trade and economic cooperation are also showing equally negative dynamics, “soft power” is virtually the only way to ensure a regular dialogue, including cooperation in education, science, culture and sport.

One such mechanism is the Russian Kontinental Hockey League (KHL). It was founded in 2008 at the initiative of SOGAZ, a subsidiary of Gazprom, and united teams from the former USSR. The Latvian team Dynamo Riga, sponsored by the Russian gas distributor Itera, actively participates in the tournaments. The existence of the league allows fans to participate in matches with teams from different cities of the former USSR, as well as to travel with the team to Russia. The league has also achieved a success in marketing activities. Live coverage of KHL matches has become an indispensable feature of Latvian bars and restaurants. Not only souvenirs with the Dynamo logo, but also emblems of Russian teams can be purchased in a KHL’s specialist shop, as well as in retail outlets near the Arena in Riga. Particular attention is paid to attracting young fans, which was expressed in the slogan of one of the branding companies: “Our most important asset is the smile of children at KHL matches” (Ivanova 2018, 164).

On 20 December 2010, during the first official visit to Russia by the President of Latvia since 1991, Valdis Zatlers presented Vladimir Putin with a Dynamo T-shirt with the Russian politician’s name on its back. The Latvian President recalled how

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<sup>16</sup> <http://sport.rian.ru> (accessed 3.08.2011).

<sup>17</sup> <http://ria.ru> (accessed 23.03.2012).

<sup>18</sup> <http://sport.ria.ru> (accessed 26.01.2012).

they discussed the KHL at a meeting in Helsinki in February 2010. Putin remarked at the time: “this is really my project. I invented it”<sup>19</sup>.

The success of KHL has set an example for other Russian companies that began to build relationships with basketball clubs in the Baltic States. At the end of 2008, VTB Bank initiated the formation of a basketball league to which the best clubs in Eastern Europe were invited. The VTB United League brings together 20 teams from Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Of particular interest to the VTB Basketball League is the rivalry of two legendary Soviet basketball clubs – CSKA Moscow and Zhalgiris Kaunas. A match between these teams is a great sports event for fans from both countries. The League has also decided to create an online forum for fans, which is accessible in Russian, English and Lithuanian, based on the assumption that interest in sport often causes interest in the life of the state as a whole, and therefore it may contribute to the improvement of mutual relations (Ivanova 2018, 164).

An attempt to “warm up” the image of one of the most negatively perceived regions of Russia – Chechnya – could be viewed in 2011 when the RFU chose Grozny – the capital of the republic – as the meeting place for the national teams of Russia and Lithuania. The Lithuanian Football Association accepted this choice, but two weeks before the match, (scheduled for 12 November), the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed “surprise” that the RFU proposed the North Caucasus, which is on the list of countries and regions not recommended for travel. Moscow left this matter to the local authorities – the Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, who was “astonished” to see an “inadequate” statement by the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, in his view, was a covert attempt to politicise sport, similar to a boycott of sporting events due to political reasons during the “Cold War”. Kadyrov “reminded” the Lithuanians that many international cultural and sporting events, in which Lithuanians had also participated, had been held in Grozny in previous years, and they had all been organisational successes<sup>20</sup>. The match was eventually played and concluded with a 2:0 score for Russia.

Matches also took place at tragic moments. This was the case in September 2011, when 26 players and 11 members of the training and medical-technical staff of the “Lokomotiv” hockey team from Jarosław were killed in a plane crash. President Andris Bērziņš wrote a special letter of sympathy to President Dmitry Medvedev<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.rian.ru> (accessed 16.08.2020); <http://archive.government.ru> (accessed 16.08.2020).

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.chechnya.gov.ru> (accessed 10.11.2012).

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.president.lv> (accessed 16.10.2011).



## Conclusions

To sum up the above considerations, it can be concluded that sport has always played a consolidating role in Russian domestic politics, shaping the formation and development of national identity, as well as civic education and patriotism; while in international politics, it has served primarily to increase the prestige of the state. According to President Putin's words, "the accomplishments of our compatriots will set an example for the young generation, a good incentive to promote a healthy lifestyle and sport"<sup>22</sup> (Kononenko | Dorofeyeva | Bepalova 2014, 185-186).

In 2017, the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, said that Russia had special troops for "information operations", because there was a war for the minds and mass awareness of the people, and propaganda must be smart, intelligent and effective. In his words, he revealed the role and meaning of "soft power", of which sport is one element. If used skilfully, it is able to convey and strengthen ideas, as well as to build a positive image and to facilitate the process of communication<sup>23</sup>.

In relations with the Baltic States, Russia has been trying to strengthen its position using sport, among other things. Firstly, it has been taking steps to convey its own vision of history at sporting events; secondly, it has been using sporting rivalry as a manifestation of its power; and, thirdly, it has been trying to improve its image in this way. Ironically, it should be noted that Moscow itself keeps politicising sport while, at the same time, it constantly accuses its opponents of doing exactly the same.

Sadly, it appears that, despite its tremendous potential, Russia is unable to utilise the international functions of sport, as the People's Republic of China and the United States have done, for example. The steps taken so far (the World Athletics Championships in 2013, the Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014 and the World Cup in 2018) are rather rare and inconsistent. There is no coordination centre to monitor the implementation of tasks and financial costs. The digital information policy improving Russia's image in the world is also underdeveloped, as is the ongoing interaction between the state and non-governmental organisations, civil society, business and the media (Osinina | Urozhok 2016, 80-81). Repeating doping scandals and ineffective reactions from Russian sports activists (for example, the "meldonium doping scandal") do not help, either (Makarychev | Yatsyk 2018, 121).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the reaction to the KHL hockey game played by the Finnish team Yokerita and the Moscow team Spartak in Tallinn, in the local ice arena of Tondirab, in October 2018. The editor-in-chief of a popular daily newspaper "Postimees", Ott Järvela wrote:

<sup>22</sup> <http://kremlin.ru> (accessed 16.11.2011).

<sup>23</sup> <http://api.duma.gov.ru> (accessed 19.02.2020).

KHL's visit to Tallinn is an interesting sporting event and I understand the enthusiasm of hockey fans in Estonia. However, it would be unfortunate if these visits led to a lasting relationship between the Estonian capital and KHL. The Russian bastion of soft power is not needed here<sup>24</sup>.

This comment proves how deep the mistrust in Russia's relations with the Baltic States is and, therefore, it is difficult to expect it to be overcome quickly.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://sport.postimees.ee> (accessed 29.10.2018).