

# Geopolitics of Sport

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An analysis of where geopolitics and sport collide

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# Executive Summary

*Thomas Woodlock*

This public report is for anyone interested in geopolitics or sports, and especially for those intrigued by both. The 14 members of the team at London Politica who authored this report examine the nexus between geopolitics and sport. This intersection is explored through a diverse range of case studies within Football, the Olympics, E-sports, Formula One, Cricket, American Football, Tennis and Gaelic Football. The wide range of sports examined should appeal to an equally diverse audience from around the world.

The report is easily navigable and the reader can jump to the case studies they are most interested in with ease. Simply click on the case study you want to read on the contents page and you will be taken to the appropriate page of the report.

Within the report you will be taken on a journey through how some of the world's most popular football clubs are financed, used as channels of protest, utilised for geopolitical ambitions and how they can be sanctioned in the fallout of war. You will also be able to explore the importance of the Olympics for political legitimacy, soft power projection and independence ambitions. You will be shown how political disputes in the highest places on earth can impact one of the world's newest sports, E-sports. If you are a Formula One fan there is plenty for you within this report including; politically backed sponsorship deals, sanctioned drivers, the reasoning behind questionable race destinations and corporate social responsibility within the sport. If you are a cricket fan, there is a section for you showing the importance of geopolitics for the future of the sport and how it can be utilised for diplomacy. If you are an American football fan you can read how the sport has been used as a platform for political change. Perhaps your favourite sport is tennis and you are curious to why some of the world's best players were unable to compete at Wimbledon this year. If you ever wondered why football, invented in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, never became the favourite sport in Ireland despite its popularity elsewhere, there is also a section for you in this report.



# FOOTBALL





# Oil Money in Football

*Isti Miskolczy & Frank Stengs*

Not only European top football competitions with majority shares owned by oil and gas companies are heavily influenced by the – primarily Middle Eastern – actors and countries of this industry. Specific football clubs owned by public investment funds or businessmen from the Persian Gulf also make geopolitics and football strongly interconnected. European football clubs such as PSG, Manchester City, Newcastle United, or Malaga have all been owned or led by significant political and economic actors of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates since the 2000s and the 2010s for example. Moreover, well-known Middle Eastern companies are also heavily sponsoring the most iconic clubs of Europe. Emirates Airlines are for instance featured on the jerseys of Arsenal, Real Madrid, and AC Milan, and Qatar Airways' logos are displayed on AS Roma's kit. Such involvements, however, have ultimately [shifted the centre of world football](#) from Europe to the Middle East. This poses certain geopolitical risks. This section of the analysis will look into a few specific football clubs owned by investment funds of countries built on oil and their impact not only on European football but also on European politics.

## **PSG**

One of France's most successful and prestigious football clubs, Paris Saint-Germain was acquired by Qatar Sports Investments, a closed shareholding organisation in 2011. The club's new president became Nasser Ghanim Al-Khelaifi, a minister in the Qatari government with a close relationship with the Emir of Qatar. Ever since, Qatar Sports Investments has invested incredible amounts of capital into the club, buying football superstars Kylian Mbappe for €145 million or Neymar for €222 million. These continue to be the two most expensive transfers in the history of European football. Due to such large investments, PSG was [accused](#) of breaking the financial fair play rules of UEFA.

## **Manchester City**

The most recent winners of the English Premier League have been owned by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member of the royal family of Abu Dhabi of the United Arab Emirates since 2008. With its high-profile and expensive transfers (Jack Grealish for €117 million and Kevin De Bruyne for €75 million), allegations that the club may have also broken the financial fair play rules have arisen. In 2019, Bayern Munich's president [expressed](#) that whenever Manchester City signs an expensive player, "the next day the sheikh raises the price of oil to recoup the money".



## Newcastle United

This historical club is the most recent example of football being financed by the oil industry. In 2021, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), led by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al-Saud bought Newcastle United, transforming it into one of Europe's richest clubs. The club now has £320 billion in assets it can leverage, surpassing both PSG and Manchester City in this aspect. There has been a sponsorship deal with NOON, a shopping website that Saudi Arabia's PIF owns a 50% stake in. There has also been controversy, one example being [the release of a white-green third kit](#), resembling the Saudi national kit and its flag. Links between Saudi Arabia and Newcastle United will only strengthen and as a consequence, any positive moves the club makes, such as promoting diversity or producing more local talent will likely be [labelled as sports washing](#).

These investment funds have strong political links to their countries and personal links to their royal families. Their decisions to invest in football is a door not only to a specific global market (of sponsorship deals, broadcasting rights, and ticket, merchandise, and hospitality sales) but also to a considerable amount of political influence. Accordingly, such investments [have the potential](#) to help reduce the reliance Gulf States have on oil revenues.

Sports have always been a popular means of deflecting people's attention away from the negative press, such as the allegations of serious human rights violations, towards the more positive public image of being a welcoming, sport-enthusiastic country. Football is especially good for such aims as it is one of the world's most popular games. Investment decisions into sports are just as much about reputation and influence as it is about business and profit. Moreover, petrostates such as Qatar and the UAE use their football investments to [brand](#) themselves as progressive contributors to the neoliberal global economy.

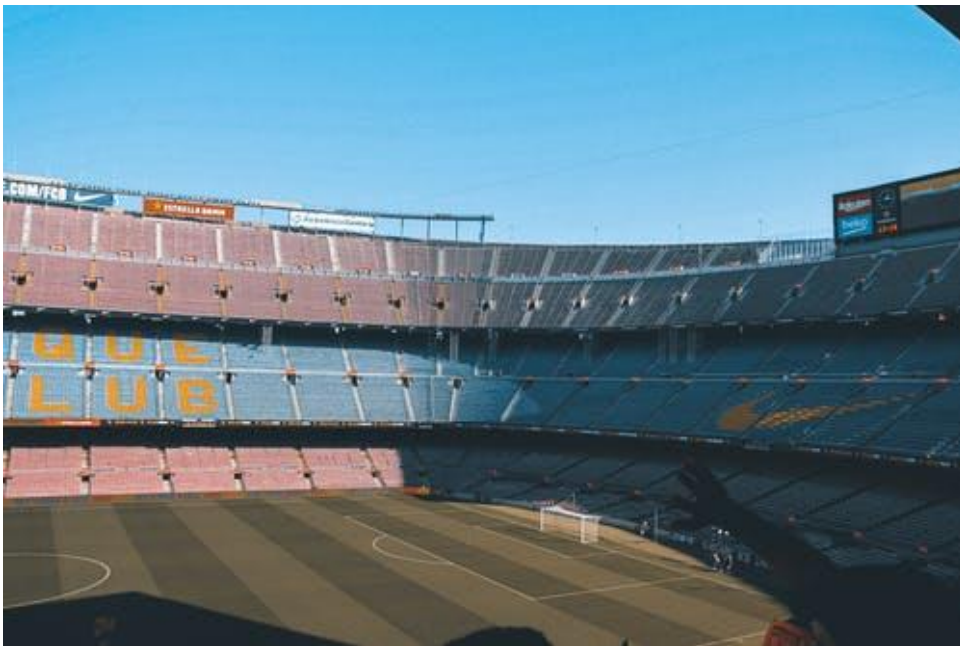
This approach to sports diplomacy also carries risks. [According to the Middle East Institute](#), Qatar could face "soft disempowerment", the loss of influence, attractiveness, and prestige. In the case of the 2022 World Cup, Qatar has been criticised for its treatment of migrant workers. Several groups and organisations will boycott the World Cup, such as [the ING Group](#), a Dutch bank and principal sponsor of the Dutch and Belgian national teams. The controversies even led to the [postponement of a Dutch trade mission](#).

Qatar has been on bad terms with its Gulf neighbours for the past decade as well. [Its relations with countries](#) such as Iran and Turkey, and connections to [the Muslim Brotherhood](#) and [Al Qaeda](#) have displeased Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. Moreover, its influence in the wider region and on a global scale, which was partly established through its sport diplomacy, is deemed [disproportionate by its detractors](#). It is why the recent successes of Qatar in the top of European football, are haunting other Gulf states. While Saudi investments through the PIF can be explained through diversification and improving the image of the country, they also must be viewed in relation to investments of other Gulf countries, including Qatar.



Middle Eastern politics partly explains investments into the top of European football. Politics, however, are not playing out on the pitch. Regional rivalries are not translated into matches. [According to the Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques](#), the countries have no real interest in using their club for internal Gulf politics. Nevertheless, differences are noticeable in the way these countries approach global sports investments as part of their foreign policy. These differences are most visible between Qatar and the UAE. [Qatar](#) aims to “gain dominance on the world sports stage to make it a tool for its power”, [the UAE is](#) putting much more focus on redefining its economic policy. The UAE is not a world sport hub and does not seek to define itself as one.





## The role of sports in Spanish-Catalan tensions

*Albert Cullèll Cano*

2012 saw the beginning of a political conflict that still drags on today, the Catalan bid for independence from Spain. On September 11th 2012, the National Day of Catalonia, [a million and a half people took the streets to march in an unprecedented show of support for independence](#). Prior to the demonstration, [opinion polls counted such support at 29%](#). In the latest elections in February 2021, the [independent vote amounted to 52%](#). In-between, millions peacefully demonstrated in [2013](#), [2014](#) (when a massively supported [non-binding consultation](#) on the issue was held against the rule of Spanish courts), [2015](#), [2016](#) and [2017](#). That year, a



[forbidden referendum took place](#) on October 1st amidst [Spanish repression and images of police violence](#). This culminated on a [general strike on October the 3rd](#) and, critically, the [unilateral declaration of independence](#). However, this proved to be nothing more than a [symbolic gesture](#) whose pusillanimity did not prevent the [suspension of Catalan self-rule](#), the [incarceration](#) or [forced exile](#) of the Catalan leadership. From then on, except for [peaks of protests](#) to the court's sentence of the Catalan political prisoners, the independence process has stagnated—despite relentless growing support for separation, as the latest election results show. The new Catalan leadership and the Socialist government that succeeded Mariano Rajoy's right-wing cabinet in 2018 have [embraced an approach based on dialogue](#), leading to political contestation being paused on the streets and the institutions.

Protests, demonstrations and shows of force on behalf of the independence movement rippled into sports events. In essence, sports have been largely politicised during the separatist process. The following analysis highlights the correlation between the politicisation of sports and intensity of political conflict.

### **FC Barcelona as a channel for protest**

The history between FC Barcelona and Catalonia can be traced back to the start of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). During the first year of the conflict, the president of FC Barcelona, Josep Sunyol, was [murdered](#) by Francoist troops. In the years following Republican defeat, FC Barcelona became a symbol of Catalan identity. The *blaugrana* (blue and red) flag was [brandished in their stadium in lieu of the as of then banned Catalan flag](#), yellow and red. The chant, '*Visca el Barça i visca Catalunya!*' took hold among Barça supporters, and is still today proclaimed by players, managers and executives in eventful occasions such as titles celebrations. It is no surprise that the [rivalry against Real Madrid](#), perceived as the favoured club of the Francoist regime became notorious. Victories against the capital's team is often symbolised as a win against the central government. Overall, this identification with Catalan sentiment and identity, and overall political and national engagement, is what lies behind the motto '*Més que un club*' ('More than a club'). Hence it was only natural that attempts to pull Barça to the Catalan movement be made from 2012.

Following the 2012 demonstration, Barcelona fans inaugurated a new tradition at the Camp Nou. After each game reaches [17 minutes and 14 seconds](#) of play, attendees of the game start singing 'In-Inde-Independència!', as reference to the date honoured in the Catalan National Day, September 11th 1714. This is the date when Barcelona fell to the Spanish troops during the War of Succession, marking the end of self-rule in the country for 300 years. This tradition has been less followed, something preeminent Spanish nationalists have [rushed to note](#). This correlates with the stagnation of the Catalan independence movement and the risks it posed prior to 2018. Other displays of support for independence took place during Copa del Rey finals, in [2014](#), [2015](#), [2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#) and [2019](#) where Barcelona fans whistled during the Spanish national anthem. Barcelona also played in the 2021 final but Covid-19 restrictions impeded fan attendance.



On the other side of the independence movement, attempts at attacking Barça for its pro-referendum position have also taken place. Chief among them stands the jailing of former Barcelona president Sandro Rosell, an alleged separatist. He was in [preventive detention for 2 years before being acquitted](#) due to lack of evidence that could prove the accusations of money laundering and fraud. The judge who ordered the preventive imprisonment was later promoted to a position in the Supreme Court. According to a critical witness in the trial for the so-called [Operation Catalonia](#)—a state police black-op to undermine the Catalan movement—the promotion was [promised in exchange for keeping Rosell jailed for its alleged independentism](#). Barcelona has also been [threatened](#) with being expelled from the Spanish league and forced to play in a lesser league if Catalonia was to become independent.



## Sanctions on Chelsea FC

*Raadhika Tandon and Caleb Adegbola*

Chelsea Football Club, under the ownership of Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich was embroiled in a geopolitical crisis in February 2022. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the British government started sanctioning Russian individuals and entities it believed to pose a threat to the UK. Roman Abramovich, [an oligarch with close ties to Vladimir Putin](#), was sanctioned by the government and forced to turn over leadership of Chelsea FC, which was allowed to continue operating in a restricted capacity with a special licence.



Football is a sport inherently intertwined with geopolitics. It has a huge [international reach](#), being played in almost every country and spectated by hundreds of millions and sometimes billions of people. Technological innovations such as television and satellite streaming have made the sport more accessible and lucrative, with people around the world able to watch their teams play regardless of geographic location. Ownership of popular football clubs has also become more internationalised; according to the latest [UEFA report](#), 40% of Premier League clubs are majority owned by foreign stakeholders. Russian, Iranian and Emirati nationals all have an increasing presence in club ownership and with that comes geopolitical risks. As the amount of money tied up in football continues to grow, wealthy individuals from around the globe are attracted to this investment opportunity. The alliances and previous enterprises of these individuals, however, are of concern to entities such as the British government, both from an international relations and a national security perspective.

As sports becomes increasingly entangled with geopolitics, the role of risk assessment and management becomes increasingly important to mitigate possible crises, such as the case of Chelsea FC. With the sudden invasion of Ukraine, individuals with links to the Russian government became threats to their host countries and associated enterprises. Chelsea FC was allowed to operate under [strict guidelines](#) in order to keep the club running as smoothly as possible, but the months following the sanctions on Abramovich were turbulent for everyone involved. Financial stability became a concern, the club's ability to afford away matches was called into question, and player contracts and renewals remained in limbo. While the relatively quick sale of the club to [Clearwater Capital and the Boehly Consortium](#) helped alleviate the immediate stresses, there is potential for further crises. Football is an international sport by nature and teams continue to become increasingly geopolitically intertwined. This is happening through club ownerships, coaching staff, players and sponsorships, the number of risk points that can be exploited or can explode suddenly in the face of the next global crisis continue to increase as a result.

One such risk point is that of kit sponsorship. Following the UK government's formal sanctioning on Abramovich and Chelsea, the club's main kit sponsor demanded its logo be removed from the kit immediately. Three UK temporarily suspended their sponsorship with an eye towards ending their [£40m-a-year](#) contract as soon as possible, although the club continued to use their branded kit for the rest of the season. For the 2022-2023 season, the cryptocurrency company WhaleFin has signed on as a new sleeve sponsor for [£20m-a-year](#), although a replacement for Three has yet to be found. For companies with millions of pound invested in football clubs at varying levels of sponsorship, the geopolitical risk of sports is a crucial consideration. The domino effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine leading to Chelsea F.C.'s instability is not a chain of events that companies involved with sports may have believed possible, but it is one that a political risk firm would have been able to warn of and help prepare for.



## Turkish sports: a platform for geopolitics

*Marko Cem Zerunyan*

Turkish sports are intertwined with geopolitics with football, the nation's most popular sport, dominating the scene. Nonetheless, other sports have also experienced geopolitical pressures rooted through the Turkish government's ambitions to host a Summer Olympic Games. This case study will first offer some background on how the omnipresence of the government in Turkish sports has resulted in sports becoming so enmeshed with geopolitics.



## **The omnipresence of the Turkish Government in sports**

It is a rarity in 2022 to find a national sports salon, stadium, or swimming pool not donned with a [portrait](#) of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The president himself was a semi-professional athlete, playing football for Kasimpasa Football Club before embarking on a career in politics. Perhaps it is this background which has made his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) so involved in the world of Turkish sports. The influence of the AKP on Turkish football cannot be understated. In the past decade, there have been [almost 30 state-funded stadium projects](#) (including the Recep Tayyip Erdogan stadium). In the same time period the Turkish Football Federation appointed Nihat Ozdemir, a close economic supporter of Erdogan to head the federation. During these years, steps were taken by the Turkish parliament to pass various [football-governing laws](#) and the government also arranged for a debt restructuring project for the country's top 4 football teams. Nevertheless, Turkey's ambition to achieve soft power through Olympic success and sports diplomacy has increasingly impacted other sports with geopolitical elements.

## **Reflections of foreign policy on the Turkish football pitch**

The Turkish football pitch has been a centrepiece of geopolitical messaging for Turkish foreign policy. Indeed, the pre-match arrangements in the Turkish top-flight, the Süper Lig, have seen football clubs endorse Turkish foreign policy actions on various occasions. In May 2021, Turkish giants Fenerbahçe had players, including superstar Mesut Ozil, [wear 'Free Palestine' T-shirts](#) during warmups, aligning the club with the Turkish foreign ministry who had days before called Israel a [terrorist state](#). It should be noted that Fenerbahçe's current club president is Ali Koc, a member of Turkey's wealthiest family, whose political stances carry significant influence. Accordingly, a similar choice was made to the Palestinian context by having Fenerbahçe players attend warmups in late 2019 with [T-shirts supporting the Turkish Armed Forces](#) amidst their campaigns in Northeast Syria reflected an endorsement by Ali Koc of Turkey's geopolitical actions.

Support for Turkish military actions in Syria has not been confined to Fenerbahçe. Throughout late 2019, Turkish football players across Europe showed support for the Turkish military by doing soldier salutes for their goal celebrations, subsequently landing the Turkish Football Federation a [fine from UEFA](#). In March 2020, clubs across the Turkish football leagues jointly arranged for [pre-match ceremonies](#) to celebrate the Turkish flag and give remembrance to fallen soldiers.

Another beating heart of the geopolitical pulse in Turkish football are the country's fervent ultra-football fan groups, especially Fenerbahçe's *Genç FB*, Galatasaray's *ultraAslan*, and Besiktas's *Çarsi*. Tracing back to the early 2000s, there have been instances where Fenerbahçe fans [provoked](#) Greek basketball fans with tifos depicting Fatih Sultan Mehmet's invasion of Constantinople. This caused clashes in the stands and invited statements from both



Turkey and Greece's foreign ministers at the time, Şükrü Sina Gürel and Yorgo Papandreu. Besiktas's Çarşı has also been vocal on Turkey's diplomatic enemies, previously deploring the *Mavi Marmara* crisis with Israel in 2011 by staging '[anti-Zionism' protests](#) against Maccabi tel Aviv.

However, in past years, the most expressive fan group has been Galatasaray's *ultrAslan*, led by their president Sebahattin Sirin. The *ultrAslan* president, who is affiliated with [ultra-nationalist mafia leaders](#) in Turkey, is particularly vocal on social media platforms. Notably, Sirin is a fervent pan-Turkist, supporting the [liberation of Uyghurs in 'East Turkistan'](#) with the backing of *ultrAslan*. In this regard, Sirin has largely aligned Galatasaray's ultras with the foreign policy views of the Nationalist Movement Party in the ruling coalition government.

The final geopolitical issue intertwined with Turkish football involves the treatment of Kurdish teams, such as Cizrespor and Amedspor. The Turkish Football Federation has [taken measures](#) to restrict attendance at the stadiums of these teams whilst also accusing the club management of supporting the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party. Club representatives have subsequently claimed that the federation instructed referees to officiate unfavourably against them.

### **Sports Diplomacy and Foreign Investment Relations**

Sports has increasingly become a source for the state to attract foreign investment in Turkey, whilst also serving as a strategic asset in diplomacy through bids to host sports mega events and additionally for relation-building in foreign policy through joint bids and friendly games.

In regards to foreign investment, the [broadcasting rights to Turkey's top flight](#) in football were sold to Qatar's state-funded Bein Sports when it acquired the country's leading television platform in 2015. Although Bein Sports' broadcasting past in Turkey has been unusually tumultuous due to long standing disputes with Fenerbahçe, it is believed Bein Sports [remains invested](#) in the Super Lig by lobbying the Turkish foreign ministry and through Qatar's own strategic desire to preserve relations with a close ally. Indeed, it is suggested the [newly appointed](#) football federation president Mehmet Büyükekçi was ushered in by the AKP government to help ensure a new agreement with Bein.

Arguably, a larger aspect of Turkey's sports-driven diplomacy relates to the hosting or sponsoring of sports events to extend soft power and raise the status of the nation as a developed country. Formally, the Turkish Ministry of Culture [co-sponsors](#) international sporting events in Turkey to attract awareness to Turkish culture and bring in tourism. Notably, the Turkish Airlines Euroleague Basketball—the European equivalent of the NBA playoffs—and Turkish Airlines Open Golf Tournament are two globally recognized events used for such soft power purposes.



Far more recognisable, however, are the Turkish state's efforts to host mega-events. The AKP government intensively [invested in mega-events infrastructure](#) throughout the economic boom of the 2000s and into the early 2010s, bringing the Formula One Grand Prix to Istanbul and bidding for the Euro in 2016 and the Summer Olympics in 2020. In each of these cases, the driving purpose of the bids was to reinforce Turkey's suitability and readiness for admission to the European Union, which was still an ambition for the Turkish government during those years.

Since then, Turkey has striven to host more minor events. Of current importance is the incoming Islamic Solidarity Games to be hosted in Konya. President Erdogan will be introducing the opening ceremony, showing his foreign policy is highly focused on showing Turkish leadership in the Islamic world. Nevertheless, Istanbul's twice-postponed hosting of the Champions League final has also been marred by geopolitical undertones. In fact, president Erdogan responded to UEFA's statement that the final switched locations for Covid purposes by insisting the final was moved for ['political reasons'](#).

The hosting of sporting events has also been a medium through which Turkey has tried to diplomatically strengthen neighbourly geopolitical relations. In terms of bordering Greece, the direction of relations were developing so positively that in the early 2000s, the two countries officially put themselves forward for a joint [Euro 2008 bid](#). With its eastern neighbour and traditional foe Armenia, Turkey also had matches in 2008 and 2009, the first being attended by the Turkish president Abdullah Gul. This was the first time a Turkish president had ever made an official visit to Armenia.

### **Xenophobia, Nationalism and the Modern Devshirme in Turkish Sports**

Perhaps the most intense reflection of Turkey's geopolitical issues and stances have been visible through the widespread infiltration of xenophobia in the country's sports realm. This began in the first Syrian refugee crisis. This sparked one of the most lively debates in Turkish political spheres for the past five years with fans in Turkish sport arenas having recently begun [protesting](#) the government for the influx of refugees into the country. Indeed, this has allowed for many radical fans of sports clubs like Fenerbahce to increase support, especially through social media, for ultranationalist presidential candidate Umit Ozdag, whose driving agenda is an anti-immigrant foreign policy. In the days leading up to the celebrations of Trabzonspor's championship, Ozdag was able to launch a [campaign](#) through social media inciting anger over Trabzonspor's hosting of two Greek singers, prompting the club to cancel their performances.

These same sentiments of xenophobia, primarily rooted in the country's nationalism, have also sparked controversies concerning the treatment of non-ethnic Turkish sports persons. In Turkish football, the federation has attempted to restrict the purchase of foreign players by introducing various renditions of a quota on foreigners for rosters. This decade-long debate has resulted in a [rule](#) allowing only a maximum of eight foreigners on the pitch and three on the bench in matchday lineups for the top flight. Interestingly, these actions seem to be in the exact





opposite direction of Turkey's broader sporting world, where foreigners have been readily recruited and naturalised as Turkish citizens to compete as [devshirme athletes](#). *Devshirme* refers to a system by which the Ottoman army young Christian boys conscripted for young Christian boys. Certain commentaries on the devshirme strategy have viewed these actions as part of a conscious 'neo-Ottoman' mentality of imposing the Turkish identity in new countries.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most well-reported example of Turkish nationalism penetrating into the realm of geopolitics has been in the case of Mesut Ozil's [row with the German FA](#) after the 2018 World Cup. After Ozil posted a photograph with president Erdogan in the weeks leading to the World Cup, he faced backlash from the German media for supporting a political leader with a questionable track record on matters like human rights. However, after the German national team faced historically early elimination from the tournament, Ozil spoke out against purported racism against Turks in German football. Ozil's stance ultimately gained support from the Turkish government for defending the large Turkish minority in Germany. Amidst the row, Ozil received [official phone calls](#) from the likes of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. Moreover, one year after the row ended, president Erdogan stood as the best man at Ozil's 2019 Istanbul wedding.

The example of Ozil's close relations with the Turkish Foreign Ministry is only one of numerous direct engagements between the government and individual sports persons. At this moment, four MPs from Turkey's ruling coalition are well-known former athletes. But whilst these are cases of the government maintaining good relations with certain athletes, geopolitics have also played a role in turning relations between government and athletes sour. Two identical situations are the cases of former MP and star footballer [Hakan Sukur](#) and that of NBA basketball player Enes Kanter Freedom. Both of these athletes are exiled from Turkey and currently reside in the United States and have been a point of contention in foreign relations between the US and Turkey. The Erdogan government has requested their extradition on multiple occasions. Both Sukur and Kanter were aligned with the Islamic scholar Fetullah Gulen, who is in exile in Pennsylvania and leads a religious movement now banned in Turkey. Kanter's opposition to the Turkish government led him to assist democratic senators Edward Markey and Ron Wyden [introduce a bill](#) to condemn human rights treatment in Turkey.

## The UN and FIFA in football

*Frank Stengs*

With roughly 3.5 billion fans, football is [the most popular](#) sport on earth. The popularity of the sport translates into huge revenue streams. The European football market alone was [valued at €25.2 billion](#) in 2021. With such large sums of money is a game of interests and influence. Although there is a huge focus on private corporations and countries financing the sport, the influence and power of FIFA often goes unnoticed.



Over the years, FIFA has increased its influence across the globe. There is [strong evidence](#) that global policies, such as football regulation, can be formulated and administered by FIFA. This power results from its market access to global football, which allows the organisation to force member states to deviate from national paths of sport regulation. Thus, while being a not-for-profit agency, the FIFA wields notable power on the global stage.

Another aspect of its power can be discerned from the political events it is involved in. Football is often used as a tool to establish independence and an identity. Interestingly, FIFA has [more members](#) than the UN. It even associates itself with contested territories and entities, such as Palestine, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. The political significance of football is why certain games are not allowed to be played. UEFA, one of the 6 continental FIFA organisations, has several [forbidden matches](#) which have included: Ukraine against Russia (since 2014), Kosovo against Serbia (since 2016), Kosovo against Bosnia-Herzegovina (since 2016), Kosovo against Russia (since 2019), Armenia against Azerbaijan (2010) and Spain against Gibraltar (2013). FIFA decisions sometimes carry significant political implications that go far beyond the realm of sports.



## China Football House

*Frank Stengs*

In 2016, China revealed its plans to become a “[football superpower](#)” by 2050. With massive financial backing, China set out to improve its football standards, which was symbolised by the arrival of famous, mostly Brazilian, players. Overseas, Chinese investors purchased massive stakes in [multiple major European football clubs](#), including AC Milan, Internazionale, Atletico Madrid, Aston Villa and Wolverhampton. The heavy financing can



partly be explained as an investment, but a sizable part can be determined as a bid for China to bolster its soft power.

Alarmed by the sums of money that were flowing to foreign players and clubs, Chinese authorities introduced several restrictions on spending in 2018. Not only did it limit the amount that could be spent on foreign players, it also led to several Chinese investors [pulling out](#) of foreign clubs. In 2021, however, there were also signals coming out of China that many clubs were experiencing financial issues. Rather than attracting foreign stars, they were now leaving the country en masse. This led [Deutsche Welle](#) to pose the question of whether any significant progress had actually been made in the Chinese Super League.

The failure of the Chinese Super League was influenced by the perception of foreign players and the financial status of clubs and their owners. In China's bid to become a football superpower, it needed to develop local talent. However, quickly after attracting the foreign stars, they became viewed [as detrimental to the development of local talent](#). Supposedly, foreign players came to China for a [vacation](#) and to earn a “[quick-buck](#)”. Concerns were growing that big spending and the arrival of foreign football players did nothing to aid the local development of football players. Hence, the Chinese Football Association 1) [restricted](#) the amount of foreign players per team and 2) [required](#) an amount of U23's per team to be active. More importantly, [restrictions](#) on wages were put in place. Combined with the economic situation during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, these efforts discouraged the signing of “big-players”.



## The geopolitics behind the European Super League

*Marko Cem Zerunyan*

### **Background**

The announcement in April 2021 that twelve of Europe's top professional football clubs formally agreed to form the 'European Super League' (ESL) sent shock waves through world football and threatened to supplant the Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA)



crowning competition, the UEFA Champions League. Although the project's first attempt collapsed quickly with the help of political leaders such as Boris Johnson, the European Super League still remains a possibility in the future. Ultimately, the aim of this project extends into the realm of geopolitics as well.

The European Super League interestingly sees two non-European spheres of influence compete to capture commercial soft power over football. As the world's most popular sport, football is a cultural asset of European soft power. It has enabled European clubs to attract international fan bases that make [positive associations](#) with European cities as a result of their the football clubs they support.

The clearest expansion of geopolitical influence through the ESL is the investment of Gulf money from the UAE and, [reportedly Saudi Arabia](#). Over the past decade these Gulf states have consolidated their soft power by sponsoring football mega-projects and thereby building a positive image around associated names like Etihad and [NEOM](#). Nevertheless, these Gulf states have met strong opposition to the ESL by neighbouring Qatar on the Arabian peninsula.

In addition to the deliberate foreign policy effort involved in the Gulf interests behind the ESL, the ESL also has strong corporate and private equity backing from the United States. Although not explicitly government-backed, these interests represent another context of the United States continuing to systematically integrate neo-liberal capitalism across global markets. The geopolitical aspect of the ESL can be viewed through the lens of European countries seeking to protect the sovereignty of their football economy. Ultimately, the push from the American sponsors of the ESL has driven the discussion of the debacle to the halls of the EU [parliament](#) and [courts of justice](#) with most politicians citing fears of football losing its grassroots culture in Europe.

### **The Dynamics of UAE and Qatar in the ESL**

The European Super League debacle has served as a [proxy stage](#) for the tensions between the UAE and Qatar, especially through the well-known clubs they own, Manchester City and Paris Saint Germain (PSG). As regional foes on the Arabian peninsula with similarly structured petro-economies and conservative governments, it is no surprise that both Qatar and the UAE have identically invested heavily in football as part of their foreign policy agendas.

In recent history, foreign policy disagreements between Qatar and the wider Middle East resulted in a four-year economic blockade of the former. But in spite of these economic obstacles, the Qatari state continues to funnel money into football and challenges the UAE's soft power. Just as Etihad and Fly Emirates sponsors have been ubiquitously present on the jerseys of top clubs across Europe, Qatar's investments in football have made the Bein Media Group the top broadcasting provider for European football across the globe. The state-backed media conglomerate is currently in a long-term agreement with the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) for Champions League broadcasting rights. As a result, footballing



superpower Paris Saint Germain (PSG), who are also owned by the Qatari state and share board members with Bein, have been excluded from the ESL project.

The exclusion of PSG from the ESL was inevitable. PSG's participation in the competition would have meant the same owners of Bein Media (the Qatar sovereign wealth fund) were endorsing a project that ran in a direct competition to Bein's profitable long-term broadcasting agreements with UEFA. Not only that, the foreign policy image of Qatar supporting such a controversial football project only a year before the 2022 World Cup would ruin its chances of improving its tarnished image in the West due its poor human rights record.

Even if the UAE-backed Manchester City found itself in the opposite position to PSG, effectively accepting an invitation to the ESL, the club's ownership had serious hesitations in terms of political optics from the start. Given the Emirati ownership's foreign policy goals of building a positive image of the UAE through City, the controversy of the ESL jeopardised the immense progress made on this front. In the city of Manchester, the ownership has already changed unfavourable perceptions by sponsoring multimillion-pound development projects that have revitalised the eastern part of the city. This is precisely why Lord Udney-Lister, Boris Johnson's special envoy to the Gulf, [issued](#) a warning to Emirati government representatives shortly after the ESL was announced, asserting the row would damage the country's amicable relationship with the UK.

Ultimately, the ESL debacle has panned out to be a victory for Qatari soft power in the world of football geopolitics and lobbying. Bein Media's contract for Champions League broadcasting has allowed the Qatari state to defend its interests in UEFA through Nasser al-Khelaifi. Al-Khelaifi sits on UEFA's executive committee whilst also acting as chairman of PSG, BeIN Media Group, and Qatar Sports Investments (a subsidiary of the Qatar sovereign wealth fund). Al-Khelaifi's involvement in preventing the ESL in recent years and preservation of Qatar's financial interests in European football is also why he was named the [most influential person](#) in world football by France Football Magazine in 2020.

### **The Clash of Corporate American Interests and the European Union**

As perhaps a mirror of the developments in past decades in the international financial markets and economy, the mere possibility of the ESL's creation highlights the diminishing economic influence of Europe in comparison to the economies of the United States, China, and the Gulf. Simon Chadwick, Professor of Eurasian Sport at Emlyon Business School in France, [points](#) out the ESL's capitalist design is in stark contrast to 'the social democracy of Europe, particularly Germany, where there's a more social-democratic model of governing football'.

The demise of this 'social democratic' model has geopolitical implications. By opening capacity for greater foreign sponsorship, it invites geopolitically-questionable investments into European football clubs. A short list of the controversial sponsors in European football deeply linked to undemocratic states include names like Gazprom, Visit Rwanda and Huawei. Indeed,



it is reminiscent of the struggles faced by the National Basketball Association, which has frequently distanced itself from any criticisms over the [Hong Kong protests](#) or the [Uyghur Crisis](#) in order to appease multibillion dollar Chinese investment. In Germany, which guarantees a majority of voting rights to fans and club members by the ‘50 percent + 1 share’ system, clubs like Bayern Munich have gone through onerous processes to accept sponsorships that risk questionable political stances. But despite these measures, the club management was controversially able to prevent fans from blocking the club's major Qatar Airways sponsorship deal.

Although not as overt as the sponsorship campaigns of state-backed Gulf corporates, [David Ellwood](#) explains that American investments into football are partially about an organic expansion of American neo-liberal soft power from the geopolitical perspective. Indeed, America's advancement of its political and economic agenda in Europe has historically not been confined to formal government efforts like the Marshall plan, but also media-based methods like Hollywood. Furthermore, the ambitions of [American streaming services to enter the sports broadcasting realm](#), could increase their influence over decision-making in European football.

Looking at the emergence of the ESL, it was only when the American owners of Liverpool, Manchester United, Arsenal, and AC Milan agreed to take up the vision of Real Madrid President Florentino Perez that the project became viable. After that, it simply required the backing and billions of dollars of financing by American bank J.P.Morgan to get the operations up and running. Of course, there is no undermining that in retaliation to the ESL's proposed hyper-commercialisation of European football, the responses of political leaders like British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and French President Emmanuel Macron were emphatic and forceful. Although the league is stopped in its tracks for now, the financial interests in such a project remain strong.



# THE OLYMPICS





# The future of the Olympics?

*Arshdip Singh*

Previous Olympic hosts demonstrated their administrative and infrastructural prowess through the construction of new venues that were [subsequently abandoned](#). The Olympic games of tomorrow, particularly Paris 2024, will look to demonstrate similar prowess through a different approach, namely [expediting the improvement](#) of existing infrastructure. In doing so, host nations look to make [progress towards sustainability](#) policies.

## **Paris**

Paris will play host for the 2024 games, with the games generating [10.7 billion euros and 250,000 jobs](#). The games have also formally joined the [“Race to Zero” campaign](#), initialised by the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Central to Paris’ bid was the need to [mitigate transport issues](#) experienced in previous games such as Rio 2016. Paris has focused on expanding its rail network and the Grand Prix Express, with new lines being added that will [extend to the suburbs of Paris](#). The plan forms part of France’s wider policy to fully [decarbonise its transport by 2050](#); it is in this spirit that [domestic flights under 2 hours](#) were prohibited. The games will be utilised as a tool to expedite the [transformation of existing infrastructure](#).

In a similar vein, Paris 2024 will make use of [95% of existing infrastructure](#), with the remaining venues being developed in areas that are in need of [regeneration](#). Similar plans were seen in London, where Olympic development was used to [revitalise existing areas](#). However, the consequences of development in east London resulted in a [rise in property prices](#). The revitalisation of areas, and making use of existing venues is an attempt to establish an Olympic economic model that is [affordable and minimises waste](#). Success in this area will shape future Olympic games and increase the likelihood of [bids from host nations](#) being accepted.

Future Olympic Games will continue to show its infrastructural and administrative prowess through [running efficient and sustainable games](#). However, the main aim behind confirmed host nations and future bids will be to expedite their [respective policies for transformation](#), particularly promoting their sustainability targets.





# The Olympics as a tool of soft power

*Shyla Robinson*

Hosting the 2008 Olympics cost Beijing approximately [\\$52.7 billion](#), with the opening and closing ceremony alone amounting to [\\$100 million](#). Six years later, the Winter Games in Sochi cost Russia [\\$59.7 billion](#), making it the most expensive Olympics in history, incurring a debt that has been estimated to cost taxpayers approximately [\\$1 billion](#) every year for the foreseeable future. At a lower figure but equally heavy cost, the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro cost Brazil [\\$13 billion](#) and resulted in the city requiring a [\\$900 million government bailout](#) to cover security costs alone; a number of public employees are believed to have not been [adequately compensated](#). So why do countries choose to host the games, or more specifically, what incentivises newly industrialised nations to shoulder the debt of hosting mega sports events at the expense of investing in economic and human development?

Historically, the Olympics have often been employed as a political tool to signal influence by states. In the 20th century, the games often took on the role of an icebreaker. This was the case when the US sent their table tennis team to China to engage in [‘ping-pong diplomacy’](#), resulting in the lifting of a 20-year trade embargo. They have also been used to signal animosity between two nations, as was exemplified by the [USA-USSR boycotts](#) of the 1980 and 1984 Olympics in Moscow and Los Angeles, respectively. The turn of the century, however, has seen a sharp rise in another variety of sports diplomacy: using sporting mega-events to build soft power in a comparatively less polarised, and increasingly globalised international system. [Defined](#) as the ability to achieve one’s goals through attraction as opposed to coercion, soft power ideally propels a nation to the status of a ‘thought-leader’ to which other states look to for guidance and leadership. This allows nations that have garnered such influence to shape preferences to align with their own strategic goals. Events like the Olympics can contribute to the accumulation of soft power through the international exposure they offer the hosting country, which in turn allows them to share their culture with a global audience.

Beginning with the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the primary objective to host the games was for China to establish itself as a rising power through demonstrating its economic prowess, commitment to sustainable development and technological progress. With an estimated [one billion people](#) tuning in for the opening ceremony alone, it is fair to conclude that the international exposure amplified China’s prominence on the world stage by granting it a level of attention that is challenging to attain. Thus, hosting the Olympics allows for a country to dominate the news for the length of the event – if not longer – which allows for the culture and values it exemplifies to be firmly embedded in the global conscience. However, such extended media coverage comes at a cost for authoritarian states like China, such as the risks of being exposed for human rights and environmental violations. Aware that the whole world is watching, opposition groups are more likely to challenge a state’s legitimacy by staging protests when international journalists are present to witness their discontent and potential retaliatory repression. Pre-empting such strategies, before the 2008 games the Chinese



government set up traps to identify likely dissidents by stating that there would be [“protest zones”](#) within the city. To access these areas, however, protesters were required to acquire prior permission to demonstrate. True to its surveillance state status, the Beijing police traced the contacts and arrested opposition figures before the games began, thus leaving the protest zones empty. This enabled the state to avoid resorting to the usual repressive treatment and signal to the world that there wasn’t any public discontent. To the average viewer, this created an image of a modern, environmentally and socially conscious, legitimate state, if not a rising superpower.

In the 2014 Sochi Olympics, Russia made a similar bid to legitimise its autocracy and with extravagant spending amounting to nearly [\\$60 billion](#), signal that their days of being a global superpower are not behind them. Two years prior, although a significantly different kind of regime, the United Kingdom’s 2012 Olympics in London had similarly tried to posture the country as remaining a major player on the world stage. Through an emphasis on their modernity, the UK sought to transform its image from that of a [“dwindling empire with antiquated traditions”](#) to one confident in its postcolonial identity. Four years later at the 2016 Olympics in Rio, we continue to see a nation undertaking the substantial strains of hosting the games in order to establish themselves on the global stage, which in Brazil’s case was as an emerging power. At this point, however, it is worth asking just how effective these attempts are at truly manifesting soft power and persuading other states to follow their vision or look to them for guidance. Given the publicity the Olympics gives, it can go either way. In an increasingly diverse media landscape peppered with calls for boycotts, publicity often takes unfavourable turns. It can be argued that hosting can only alter a country’s global standing to a certain degree. The Olympics cannot erase a country’s authoritarian tendencies, historical wrongdoing, populist tendencies or general incompetence.





# The Refugee Olympics Team

*Ruy Scalamandr *

The Olympic Games are perhaps the most comprehensive and far-reaching international sporting event. The last rendition of the Games, Tokyo 2020, saw over 10,000 athletes representing [205 countries and territories](#). Given the exceptional reach of the Games globally, the potential for the Games to be used to propagate political messages has been used numerous times since the International Olympic Committee (IOC) held its first Summer Games in 1896. Examples include the U.S. track and field athletes, [Tommie Smith and John Carlos](#), raising black leather gloves to protest the treatment of African-Americans in their home country in 1968 and athletes from Islamic countries [refusing to compete](#) against their Israeli counterparts because of the treatment of Palestinians by the Israeli government.

In recent years the IOC has been using its own platform to promote its values of Olympism – [“excellence, friendship, and respect”](#). It was in this spirit that in 2015 the IOC set out to create a team representing a [team of refugee athletes](#) for the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Refugee Olympic Team (ROT) was the first instance of a non-country entry to the games, fully sponsored by the IOC. Since 2016 the IOC has [continued to sponsor](#) the ROT and will continue to do so until at least 2026. Initially only 10 athletes were selected to compete for the ROT in 2016 but by Tokyo 2020 this number increased to 29. The goal of the ROT, [according to the IOC](#), is to create a platform for refugee athletes and bring awareness to the ongoing hardships faced by refugees worldwide. By doing so, the IOC is able to influence political narratives on refugees in a positive way. The timing of the ROT establishment for the 2016 Summer Games in Rio coincided with the tragic events happening in the Mediterranean Sea, where refugees attempting to reach Europe [died at sea](#). In the political arena, populist movements in Europe pressured governments to fix the “problem” of the so-called migrant crisis. Certain governments, like [Germany](#), opened their doors and welcomed refugees but other countries quickly found ways to refuse access to refugees. For example the former Italian minister of internal affairs, Matteo Salvini, [turned away a vessel](#) carrying refugees into Italian ports. Outside of politics, the media also played a significant role in [maintaining a negative narrative](#) towards refugees..

The formation of the ROT served not only as a platform to represent and showcase the talents of refugee athletes but also placed the refugee athletes on a level playing field with athletes endorsed by national Olympic committees. In so doing, the IOC made a proactive push to change narratives on refugees for the better, whilst defending and promoting its business interests. The IOC is a [non-profit sporting association](#) that prides itself on using its profits to invest in sports, athletes, and to ease the burden of hosting the Games for host countries. This suggests the IOC’s business interests are largely in line with its [moral ethos](#) of creating and financing “a better world through sport”.



Such an initiative to increase the participation and representation of minorities or underrepresented groups is not exclusive to the Olympics. For example, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) created the [W-Series](#) in late 2018. The W-Series is a free-to-enter motor racing championship comprised of female-only racing drivers, providing “equal opportunities to women and eliminates the financial barriers that have historically prevented them from progressing” into the top tiers of automobile racing. This is an initiative of the FIA’s [Women in Motorsport](#) division and as of 2022 W-Series events are held alongside Formula 1 races. Similarly, football also has a bottom-up approach to representation. Unlike the initiatives set up by the IOC or FIA, many grassroots are partially or totally independent from the main organising body, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), but are nevertheless effective in giving less privileged athletes the opportunity to play and to make it as professional athletes. A noteworthy example of such an organisation is Edmonton Free Footie, based in Canada. Edmonton Free Footie served as a gateway into the world of professional football for Bayern Munich superstar [Alphonso Davies](#), the son of two Liberian refugees in Canada.

Whilst the W-Series and grassroots organisations in football demonstrate sport in general is able to act as a bridge between the political stigma of refugees and genuine opportunities in sport, the FIA and FIFA do not enjoy, to the same extent as the IOC, the reach and prestige of their sport and finance. The IOC’s Olympic sports are less costly and competitive from a financial standpoint because the IOC is financially and operationally independent, collaborating with governments only when necessary. On the other hand, the commercial value and competitive nature of motorsport and association football invites stakeholders, often with competing interests and goals, to collaborate to find compromises on how sport should be organised. Therefore, the IOC is able to traverse the intersection of business, geopolitics and sport with relative ease compared to some other sports.

In conclusion, the ROT acts as a platform for the realisation of individual sporting talent on offer from refugees and raises awareness to the hardships endured by refugees all over the world. With the number of asylum-seekers and refugees [increasing](#), the relevance of the ROT is consistently renewed. Fundamentally, the ROT is also the result of a unique balancing act between political and business interests in the world of sport. This is achieved by the relative autonomy the IOC enjoys from external stakeholders’ business interests through financial independence and a long-standing history of the Olympic Games as a prestigious sporting event, with most countries devoting a great deal of resources to the Games.



# The Catalan candidacy for the 2020 Winter Olympics

*Albert Cullell Cano*

In 2010, the mayor of Barcelona, Jordi Hereu, proposed Barcelona in cooperation with the Pyrenees present its [candidacy for the Winter Olympics in 2026](#). The proposal was [ratified](#) next year by the new mayor, Xavier Trias. However, in light of the Catalan bid for independence and consequently the foreseeable lack of Spanish support necessary for successful application, mayoress Ada Colau [shelved the Barcelona-Pyrenees candidacy](#). However, in 2018 and after the arrival of the new Socialist government to Spain, the president of the Spanish Olympic Committee (COE), Alejandro Blanco, proposed to [resurrect the project](#) for the 2030 games. To this both Catalonia and Spain acquiesced.

In the following years, the Pyrenees-Barcelona candidacy expanded to include Aragon, the neighbouring autonomous community of Catalonia. In January 2022, views about the candidacy's organisation began to [clash between Catalans and Aragonese](#). Catalonia's approach to the distribution of the Olympic trials is [reported to have been strictly technical](#), displaying an open disposition to dialogue and negotiation. However, Aragon has [backed out of the initial agreement](#) and proves to be a rocky opponent at the negotiating table.

The [project has been declared dead](#) by Blanco. The COE president pointed to Javier Lambán, president of Aragon, as [the one to blame](#) for the failure of the negotiations and applauded the Catalan delegation for their compliance. This was because of an agreement to hold [fewer trials in Aragon](#), which Lambán had refused under accusations of catalanophobia. To cap all this, Lambán has [admitted](#) that it was the initial intention of the Spanish government to politically utilise the candidacy to 'return Catalonia to the constitutional fold'. As for the latter, the Catalan government has ignored this and plans to present a [solo candidacy](#) for the games in 2030 or 2034, but other than verbal protests to Aragonese attitude and the lack of explicit support by the Spanish central government, they remain committed to respecting the Spanish institutions and dialogue with Spain, however fruitless it appears to have been.

## **Is the Catalan movement dead for good?**

The current Catalan government enjoys an absolute majority in parliament and received 52% of the independence referendum votes. However, they have moved from a unilateral declaration of independence to meek compliance with Spain in their bid for the Winter Olympics. In both cases, FC Barcelona's identification with Catalan politics and the 2030 Winter Olympic Games candidacy case study points to a correlation between the ups and downs of the Catalan bid for independence. All things considered, the initial hypothesis by which the politicisation of sports during the Catalan bid for independence could be used as an indicator of political risk has been proved. Thus, in response to the question opening these conclusions, it is fair to say that the political conflict is at the very least stagnated, with a Catalan government that, despite having all the electoral leverage one could desire, refuses to



escalate the conflict or pose any challenge, in a bid for dialogued resolution that nevertheless resists materialisation, as the Spanish government remains reluctant to sit at the negotiating table. However, support for independence remains high. In any event, for more about the future, we might just keep an eye on the football pitch.



# E-SPORTS





# Himalayan border clashes and E-sports

*Kevin Fulgham*

Organisations looking to partner with the rapidly growing E-Sport ecosystem should be mindful of increasing geopolitical tensions regarding data localisation. These changes may fracture the existing E-Sports competitive ecosystem. This was evident when the Indian government banned the South Korean-created but Chinese-linked mobile E-Sport game PUBG Mobile, during the 2020 to 2022 Chinese - Indian Tibetan border skirmishes along Ladakh and the Tibet Autonomous Region.

## **How did we get here?**

On May 5, 2020, China and India increased tensions along the disputed Sino-Indian border near Kashmir and Tibet. Tensions rose as Chinese forces objected to Indian road construction, leading to the first shots fired in 45 years along the border. Over the summer of 2020, there were estimates of combined Indian - Chinese soldiers [20-40 killed and 60+ injured](#).

On September 2, 2020, under [Section 69A of the Information Technology Act](#), the Indian government banned over 100 apps, in three separate rounds, from technology companies in China, citing concerns over data governance and security. "This move will safeguard the interests of crores of Indian mobile and internet users. This decision is a targeted move to ensure the safety, security, and sovereignty of Indian cyberspace...The larger issues are data privacy and security and the information the apps collect from users. We have sent 70-odd questions to the blocked apps and asked them to review and respond.", according to the [Indian Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology](#). Among them were Bytedance's TikTok, Alibaba's UC Browser, Tencent's WeChat, and Tencent-linked PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds Mobile or PUBG Mobile, [the most-watched E-Sport in the world](#).

PUBG Mobile is the mobile version of the free-to-play online multiple battle-royale game. PUBG Mobile, released in 2018, is the fourth highest-grossing mobile game and most played mobile video game of all time. According to data analytics firm Sensor Tower, India has the app's biggest market and accounts for 24% of all global downloads.

PUBG Corporation, the game developer, is a South Korean-based company owned by another South Korean-based company: KRAFTON. However, PUBG Corporation [co-develops the game's](#) mobile version with Chinese-based Tencent Games. On October 30, 2020, Tencent Games announced that it "[will terminate all service and access for users \[of PUBG Mobile\] in India](#)."

In 2021, PUBG Corporation launched a new mobile version of its game, rebranded as Battleground Mobile India (BGMI). Following Battleground Mobile India's release, new concerns arose that data from players located in India was being transmitted to third-party





servers in China. [BGMI was designed and created in India by the South Korean company KRAFTON](#). Some features unique to BGMI (versus PUBG) include reminders to players about how long they have been playing, which can be turned off if the player is over 18 years old. These features resemble a Chinese-country-specific version of PUBG Mobile, [Peacekeeper Elite](#). BGMI was initially solely released for the Android platform, used by 90% of Indian smartphone users. In June 2021, KRAFTON updated the game to fix concerns that the BGMI was sending data to data servers based in China, including some owned by Tencent.

In February 2022, Garena Free Fire, [the number one downloaded mobile game between 2019 and 2021](#), was banned by the Indian government under Section 69. Garena Free Fire is similar to PUBG Mobile's ban, as Garena is not published by a Chinese-based company (Singapore) but [partnered with Chinese-based Tencent](#). The ban followed increased January 2022 border tensions, where [satellite images showed China building new bridges in the disputed area](#).

### **What are E-sports?**

E-Sports are the emerging discipline of competitive video games. [As viewership of traditional sports decreases](#), E-sports viewership is increasing. [In 2019](#), the League of Legends World Championships reached 100 million viewers, the same amount as the NFL's Super Bowl. In 2022, [the global E-Sports audience reached 640 million](#), growing annually by 8.7% and generating \$1.38b in revenue, a third originating from China. In the competitive E-Sport ecosystem, approximately [60% of revenues](#) derive from commercial sponsorships.

E-Sport titles face the constant risk of change from their players, similar video games, or the development of new E-Sport genres. E-sports titles are unique compared to most other video games because they receive continuous technical and gameplay support in the form of incrementally downloadable updates called patches. These patches adjust aspects of the gameplay to keep the game viable as an E-sport, often removing design issues or re-balancing the game for increased competition. For other video games, technical advancement traditionally stops at the game's launch.

E-Sports' rapid development encourages the development of new games and sports titles. Nine months after Fortnite launched in 2017, it acquired 125m players, and Apex Legends reached [50m players in one month](#) after its February 2019 launch. However, as quickly as E-Sport games gain players, they can also lose them as Battle Royale game Realm Royal [lost 95% of its player base in 2 months](#). Valve's collectible card game Artifact, a competitor to Hearthstone, [lost 60% of its player base within a week](#).

Unlike traditional sports governed by federations, E-sports are commercial products governed by companies that have the power to change the game or control access via digital means rapidly. The highest level of data tracking allows E-Sport publishers data access about specific players and their locations, unlike traditional sports federations.



Whilst some may argue E-Sports are not "real sports", many sports organisations have already taken steps to partner or incorporate them into their events. The International Olympic Committee set up the [Olympic Virtual Series](#), the Asian Games made non-sport simulated [E-sports a medal-winning sport](#), and numerous sports leagues have a companion E-sports league, among them [NBA](#), [NHL](#), [Formula 1](#), and [UEFA Champions League](#).

### **What's the underlying story?**

Underlying the Sino-Indians tension over PUBG Mobile are conversations about cross-border data flows and data localization. Data Localization is "[a range of measures providing for mandatory storage or processing of data within the territory of a given country](#)." Nations are increasingly concerned about cross-border data flows, especially as artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and businesses, which rely on large data, develop and spread. Some policymakers advocate "[data sovereignty](#)" viewpoints, which extend political sovereignty in the digital space, or policymakers advocate anti-"data colonisation" viewpoints arguing that foreign corporations enter national markets, collect data of their residents, and then extract economic value back to their host countries

Between 2017 and 2021, the number of countries implementing data-localization laws doubled from [35 to 62](#). A well-known example of data localization law is the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), [passed in 2018](#). In 2019, the "Personal Data Protection Bill 2019" ([PDPB 2019](#)) was introduced to the Indian Parliament but was quickly tabled for further investigation. In December 2021, the Joint Parliamentary Committee released its two-year report on the PDPB 2019. They recommended expanding the reach of the PDPB 2019 from personalised data to certain types of non-personalized data that [could be considered proprietary](#). Other recommendations, Clause 16, involve the processing of personal data of children, which is significant as a large portion of E-Sport gamers are minors.

Currently, there is limited transnational data localization consensus and firms must carefully navigate each new market. [Lacking a data localization strategy](#) has commercial risks such as delaying the entry to new markets, increasing go-to-market regulatory burdens, and possible localized versions of products.

E-Sports are a rapidly growing, youth-oriented, sub-section of the global sports ecosystem. As E-Sports is built for a globally digital world and collects significant user data, E-sports continues to attract a wide range of commercial partnerships. Unlike traditional sports, private companies own their E-Sports and govern the intellectual property, gameplay, and access to games, giving them far greater control and ability to increase engagement than traditional sports federations.



Private companies, unlike non-profit federations, are often subject to different political and legal pressures. The Indian government's ban on Chinese-connected PUBG Mobile over geopolitical tensions is a prime example. As most E-Sports competitions feature players representing teams rather than nations, the political support present in E-sports is more limited than in traditional sports. Organisations intending to engage with E-Sports must consider the publisher's national origin and other geopolitical events. Given the political importance of transnational digital data flows, E-sports are often under greater inspection than traditional sports.



## FORMULA ONE





# F1 drivers and politically backed sponsorship deals

*Alina Vrabie*

Formula 1 has declared itself time and time again as apolitical and independent. Traditional political involvement in the form of state institutions or partisan backing is hard to spot, this is because it takes other forms with the most common being through sponsorship deals.

It has become common for drivers emerging from underrepresented countries in the sport to bring some form of political backing. It is worth considering the momentum Formula 1 gained in the past years and, of course, the substantially increased investment in the domain. As countries where the sport is not traditionally popular are seeking to boost its reach to the public and, therefore, benefit from its financial underpinnings, state-backed drivers have appeared. Often, this support takes the shape of sponsorships, especially from state-run companies.

Amongst the most controversial cases of this nature is Pastor Maldonado, holding the longest contract a Venezuelan driver has had in Formula 1, from 2011 to 2013 for Williams and from 2014 to 2015 for Lotus. However, when assessing whether his tenure was a matter of skill or funding, one quickly comes to realise it is the latter. Maldonado was one of the worst-performing drivers on the grid, having won [a single podium in his career](#) and being known to be [accident-prone](#). Of course, his persistence in the sport can be explained through the continuous state backing he received, overseen by [president Hugo Chavez himself](#). This support came through Maldonado's main sponsor, PDVSA, the state-run oil and natural gas company of Venezuela. Proving that Maldonado's seat in Formula 1 was dictated solely by his finances, the end of his sponsorship deal immediately brought the end of his career. Following the acquisition of Lotus by Renault at the end of 2015 and the alleged disputes between Renault and PDVSA, Maldonado announced his [exit from the sport](#) in early 2016.

Venezuela is not the only example of state involvement in Formula 1. Maldonado's teammate at Williams in 2012, Bruno Senna, brought Brazilian oil sponsors with him, through [Eike Batista and his company, OGX](#). Maldonado's replacement at Williams after his exit in 2013 followed a similar pattern. Felipe Massa, although arguably a better driver than Maldonado, also came with state-backing. The Brazilian driver brought [Petrobras](#), the national Brazilian oil company, and [Banco do Brasil](#) as principal sponsors to Williams upon his arrival.

But such cases are not reserved solely for Latin American countries. Perhaps an even more prolific example of state-sports intertwinement is the Russian Federation. Vitaly Petrov, the first Russian driver in Formula 1, joined Renault in 2010 with significant financial backing, most notably from [Rostec](#), a Russian state-owned infrastructure and defence company, [Novatek](#), a major Russian gas producer and [Sibur](#), a Russian government-funded petrochemical company.



## Dmity Mazepin, a case study

*Sharif Fatourehchi*

The most recent example of a Russian driver in Formula 1 that made headlines for all the wrong reasons was Nikita Mazepin. Similar to Maldonado, he was a very poor performing driver. Racing for the Haas F1 Team, [he failed to win any points](#) in the 2021 season. However it should be noted that Nikita Mazepin is the son of the Russian oligarch Dmitry Mazepin. Nikita was given his spot on the track as a consequence of Haas's sponsorship contract with Uralkali, a Russian fertiliser producer largely owned by the Uralchem Group. Uralchem Group's majority shareholder and chair is Dmitry Mazepin. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Dmitry and Nikita were both included on the [EU sanctions list](#). Dmitry was [among 36 members of the business community](#) that met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the wake of Western sanctions to discuss the aforementioned issues. Therefore, as a consequence of his affiliation with the Russian government, Dmitry and his son, Nikita, were both sanctioned by the EU. The Haas F1 Team [terminated Nikita's contract](#), leaving the driver without a team to race for in future seasons, as well as their [sponsorship contract with Uralkali](#). Uralkali and the Mazepins have been trying to earn compensation from Haas as they [claim it is their right](#) as a consequence of the one-sided termination of the sponsorship contract. None of these efforts have been fruitful and disputes are ongoing.

The F1's high barriers to entry and high operating costs means the sport is often exploited by the richest members of society. The 2021 season saw teams operating under a [budget cap of \\$145 million](#); for some teams the cap is restricting but teams like Haas require large influxes of cash to allow for smooth operations. This vulnerability allows for wealthy sponsors to leverage their finances, obtain decision making power and project a clean image for their company and themselves.





# The F1 in Saudi Arabia

*Arshdip Singh*

The first session of the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix was delayed on the 25th March 2022. This was due to a [missile strike](#) on a nearby Saudi Aramco facility, with Houthi rebels [claiming responsibility](#) soon after. In response, an emergency meeting was held involving the F1, FIA, teams, drivers and local officials. While the driver's expressed [serious concerns](#) about the prospect of continuing the race weekend, reports emerged that drivers were told by local officials that they would face [serious consequences](#) should they not continue.

The first issue to consider is whether an attack on the Aramco facility constituted a credible threat for the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. The facility was located [approximately 10 miles](#) from the circuit. The proximity to the track would indicate the threat posed was credible. Additionally, Aramco signed a global partnership deal with Formula 1 in 2020, reportedly [worth \\$450 million](#), whilst also boasting a title sponsorship with the [Aston Martin F1 Team](#). On the same day, the attack occurred in several places with the Saudi officials stating that [civilian housing](#) was also hit. These attacks have been ongoing since the start of conflict in 2015, with Houthi rebels having fired [430 missiles and 851 armed drones](#) at Saudi Arabia. Although the threat did not materialise, the fear of an attack on the circuit was credible as the missile strikes were non-discriminatory.

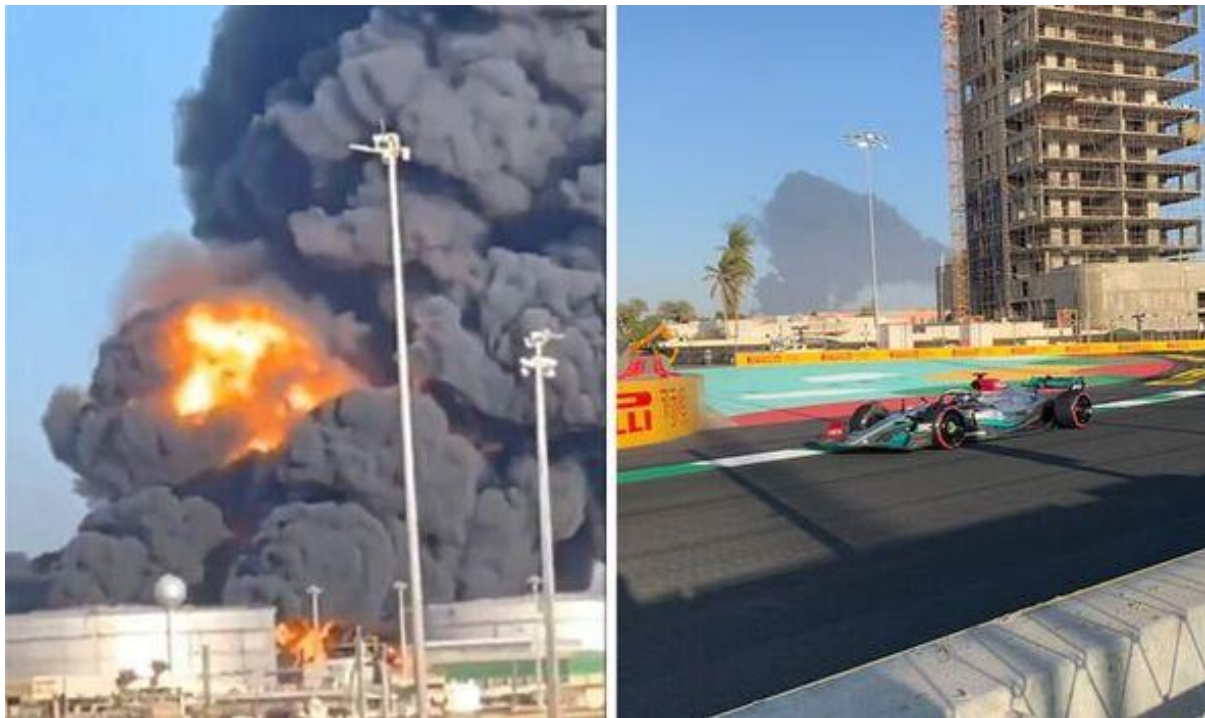
The possible consequences alluded to in the meeting between management, local officials and drivers included and were not limited to making it [difficult to leave the country](#). The insistence to continue racing is the result of two factors, sportswashing and future implications. Firstly, the ongoing conflict has seen Saudi-led airstrikes [kill "tens of thousands people" and displace more than 100,000](#). The UN has further claimed it to be [one of the largest humanitarian crisis](#). Furthermore, an F1 exodus would have negative implications for the country's prospects of holding international sporting events in the future. For example, following the 2009 attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team's bus in Pakistan, international fixtures did not return to the [country until 2018](#). Therefore, the continuance of the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix weekend strengthened the country's position, with it now hosting the [Usyk v Joshua](#) boxing match and the controversial [LIV Golf invitational series](#).

The conversation around the Saudi Arabia Grand Prix has since been quiet, and it is likely it will be revisited prior to the F1's visit next year. It is worth noting that the Russian Grand Prix was cancelled relatively quickly after the [Ukraine invasion](#), whilst the Vietnamese Grand Prix was abandoned completely due to [political corruption charges](#). The former situation would suggest that the sport has [bowed to international pressure](#), however both situations show that revenue generation is a key element. Saudi Arabian Grand Prix generates [\\$65 million per grand prix](#) and [\\$40 million in sponsorship](#). In comparison, the Russian Grand Prix contract was [worth \\$53 million](#), and the Vietnamese Grand Prix contract was [worth \\$50 million](#). The revenue generated from the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix is not significantly greater than the other venues,



however the influence of state-owned Aramco is. Aramco has explicit links with [Formula 1 and Aston Martin, whilst also possessing implicit links with Mercedes' sponsors Petronas and Ineos; Ferrari sponsor Shell; close ties with Bahraini royal family that holds majority stake in McLaren Group; Alpine Sponsor DP World; and Alfa Romeo sponsor PKN ORLEN](#). The potentially catastrophic financial implications of not racing in Saudi Arabia provides a compelling reason as to why the grand prix was not abandoned.

The drivers and teams were told they would be offered a [bigger voice](#) with regard to the countries the F1 visits. However, it is unlikely this offer can be separated from the potential revenue generation for the series. Additionally, the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix debate will likely be revisited but to no avail; unless external forces such as a [global boycott](#) are at play as they were for the Russian Grand Prix.



## Corporate Social Responsibility: The Case of F1

*Ruy Scalamandr *

Formula 1 is a global motorsport series attracting the top drivers, engineering talent, and brands in motorsport and beyond. It has a yearly viewership fluctuating around [half-billion](#) people, and its global reach means that the sport is able to visit a variety of countries around the world.





Formula 1 as a sport is organised by two principle actors – the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) and Formula One Management (FOM). FOM is a subsidiary of the Formula One Group (FOG), currently owned by Liberty Media. The FIA focuses on the regulatory side of the sport, such as rules and arbitration, whereas FOM devotes itself to handling the business side of the sport, including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy.

The FIA and FOM are two separate entities but their respective roles require significant collaboration on common issues, such as race calendars requiring [approval from the FIA's World Motorsport Council \(WMSC\)](#). This search for compromise, however, can lead to internal conflicts within the sport and amongst the FIA, FOM, Liberty Media itself. For example, the recent squabble regarding the future of [Sprint Races](#) in Formula 1 marked the first time since 2017 “the FIA and F1 [FOM] did not vote as a block”. This demonstrates that even though the FIA and FOM are independent entities, the need to work together to balance differing sporting and commercial goals can lead to internal politics that can put the various agents that run Formula 1 at odds with each other. Therefore, if FOM, the FIA, or Liberty Media express concerns or opposition towards each other's visions for the sport, the potential for internal conflict rises. As such, a balance must be struck between business, sporting interests, geopolitical realities and internal politics to ensure that the sport runs smoothly.

A potential future flashpoint between geopolitics, sport, and business within Formula 1 is the sport's CSR strategy. At the start of the 2020 season, Liberty Media and FOM made the announcement that Formula 1 would aim to campaign for [gender inclusivity, LGBTQ+ rights, and anti-racism](#) under their ‘We Race As One’ and ‘End Racism’ slogans. Formula 1 has increased its presence in the Middle East region, where such topics are usually off the agenda. In doing so, Formula 1 has demonstrated that sport can be a soft power tool, able to usher in otherwise taboo or even illegal discussion on social norms and human rights.

Internally, the 2022 season ushered in a change in Formula 1's CSR strategy. Amongst a wholesale of changes within the technical regulations of the sport, both the FIA and FOM saw change in their operational structures. The former president of the FIA, Jean Todt, was replaced by the Emirati [Mohammed ben Sulayem](#) and [Stefano Domenicali](#) became the new CEO of the FOG, replacing Chase Carey. These appointments demonstrate a divergence between the commercial and sporting interests of the FOM and FIA. During an [interview with GrandPrix247](#) during this year's Monaco Grand Prix, Mohammed ben Sulayem called out Sebastian Vettel's “rainbow bicycle”, Lewis Hamilton for being “passionate about human rights”, and Lando Norris' mental health advocacy – implying that drivers ought to focus on the driving. Indeed, the sport has parked the ‘We Race As One’ and ‘End Racism’ slogans into the garage for this season. The F1 has aimed to promote diversity in a more subtle way through [affirmative action](#) apprenticeship and internship opportunities this season.

It should be noted, that the pulling of the slogans is not the result of any individuals within the sport actions, but was something that was already taking place before ben Sulayem's



remarks. There are many speculative reasons for the change in CSR, but perhaps the most probable one is a corporate strategy composed of contrasting elements. That is, adopting pro-diversity CSR strategy whilst expanding the sport's presence in the MENA region where homosexuality is outlawed. This apparent hypocrisy was something [fans](#) and four-time champion [Sebastian Vettel criticised](#).

The principle take-away from Formula 1's change in CSR strategy within such a short time-frame is that as sports grow beyond the national or regional levels, their ability to promote political or societal ideals are fundamentally limited by the will of those who run the sport, which can change rapidly. This is a significant observation because in a world where social and political homogeneity does not exist at the level of economic homogeneity stakeholders need to be aware of operational risks when hosting sporting events. For the organisers of sporting events, backlash from fans and athletes over CSR strategies that do not align with the commercial interests of the sport can challenge the credibility of a sport's integrity and reputation. Likewise, for governments of countries whose politics do not align with the values promoted by foreign sporting events, risk inviting discourses that challenge the status quo.

As the reach and profitability of international sport increase, international sport will increasingly find itself at the intersection between business, geopolitics, and sport. An example of this is the FIFA World Cup. The international football tournament will be held in Qatar later this year, where homosexuality is outlawed. There are [concerns](#) as to how LGBTQ+ will be treated and received at the World Cup. In response to these concerns, the event organisers insist that LGBTQ+ fans are ["welcome"](#) to the event despite government officials saying that LGBTQ+ symbols will be removed for the ["protection"](#) of fans. On the other hand, FIFA has [threatened to terminate](#) 'recommended hotel' contracts for hotels turning away LGBTQ+ fans. This indicates that despite the geopolitical risks, organisers and governments are willing to compromise where the economic benefit of sporting events outweigh the associated risks.



## CRICKET





## Cricket in conflict zones

*Arshdip Singh*

### **Pakistan**

On 3rd March 2009, the Sri Lanka national cricket team's bus was [attacked](#). The match at Gaddafi Stadium Lahore was subsequently abandoned, and the Sri Lankan team was [airlifted out of the stadium](#). In similar fashion, international cricket left the country.

Prior to Sri Lanka's tour of Pakistan, there had been security concerns that led to the [withdrawal of New Zealand](#) and [Australia](#) from their tour to the country in 2002. Extremist group [Lashkar-e-Jhangvi](#) was blamed for the attack and similar attacks were seen across the border in India by [extremist group Lashkar-e-Taiba](#). Considering the worsening security situation, international cricket did not tour Pakistan, instead Pakistan continued to play their home fixtures in the [United Arab Emirates](#). Cricket is central to the Pakistani culture, therefore bringing the game back to the [country was important](#). The process started in 2015, hosting [Zimbabwe successfully](#), which was followed by the [Bangladesh Women's team](#) touring the country later on. Ten years on in 2019, Sri Lanka returned to the country completing a



[successful limited overs tour](#). Along the way, Pakistan successfully held the [Pakistan Super League](#), attracting big names from across the globe.

Whilst this suggests that the security situation in Pakistan has improved, progress was quickly derailed. New Zealand was scheduled to tour the country in September 2021, however a security alert from the New Zealand government led to the [subsequent abandonment](#). England followed suit citing the [wellbeing of players and staff as being of paramount importance](#) in the decision-making process.

Pakistan was unable to convince these nations that their intelligence services possess the ability to [identify and stop potential threats](#). The full return of cricket in the country is likely to be a slow burn, however the recent tour of a cricket giant, [Australia](#), will play a major role in speeding up the process.

## **Afghanistan**

Following the takeover by the Taliban, sports in Afghanistan took a stark turn. Specifically, sports were to be [limited to male participation](#). In response, the International Cricket Council (ICC) considered imposing measures against the Afghanistan National Cricket Team.

The ICC considered suspending Afghanistan from its full membership, but instead created a working group that would look to promote the [development of both men and women's cricket](#). In practice, the lack of infrastructure and the [dangerous consequences](#) facing women who participate in the sport, means it is likely ICC efforts will stall. However, ICC Chair Grey Barclay believes Cricket has the ability to [“influence positive change”](#) within the country.

The national team continues to play their home [fixtures in Sharjah \(UAE\)](#) and it is likely that positive change will take a while to achieve. It is also possible that further deterioration of sport within the country could also result in the national team being [suspended as a full ICC member](#). Finally, considering the Pakistan exodus, the possibility of international cricket being played in Afghanistan will likely be dictated by the [other full ICC members](#).



## Cricket diplomacy

*Shyla Robinson*

The term [“cricket diplomacy”](#) was first coined by Pakistani leader, General Zia ul-Haq, when he used an India-Pakistan Test match as pretext to travel to India and meet with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi amidst the Brasstacks Crisis in 1987. It is widely believed that the unofficial Indo-Pak talks during and after the match were central to the subsequent de-escalation in tensions which resulted in over [150,000 troops](#) being withdrawn from border regions. Although not the first instance of the subcontinent’s favourite sport drawing the rival nations together, this event illustrates the potential a match of cricket holds as a political tool to enhance, or worsen, diplomatic relations.

The idea of utilising sporting events as confidence-building measures between nations is a well-established phenomenon and can be employed to garner influence at varying levels ranging from altering public opinion to drawing high-ranking government officials together. Such diplomacy can help transcend cultural differences and humanise the “other”, a quality exhibited particularly well by cricket due to the sheer length of a test match (seven hours a day for five days) during which there is substantial interaction between spectators. This capacity for [“friendship-building”](#) is further heightened due to the natural ebbs and flows of action during the game, making room for debate and discussion regarding the outcome. Thus, cricket can enhance people-to-people contact which in turn helps prevent enemy imaging and leads to the construction of a common history.



A quick scan of India and Pakistan's long history of bilateral cricket matches, beginning in 1952 when Pakistan toured India for the first time, reveals several instances when the rival nations played one another in good spirit. For example, in 2004 when the Indian team won an ODI match in Karachi, the [Pakistani crowd stood and cheered](#) despite their own side's loss. This event was especially significant when one considers that only two years earlier the neighbours had been on the brink of nuclear war due to a crisis triggered by an [attack on the Indian parliament](#) by Pakistan-backed anti-India militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba. Indeed, it has been documented that the Indian fans, journalists, and cricketers who travelled across the border were overwhelmed by the hospitality they received, such positive sentiments were likewise expressed by the Pakistani people who welcomed almost [20,000 Indian fans](#) into their country. A similar scenario unfolded across the border in Chennai a few years earlier in 1999 when the Pakistani team won and Indian spectators gave the team a [standing ovation](#) as they took their victory lap.

The fact that this was the last test match played between India and Pakistan in the last 23 years, however, reveals the other side of cricket diplomacy: the practice of halting matches to signal animosity between the nations. Such diplomatic sanctions have primarily been initiated by India on the pretext that Pakistan is harbouring terrorists and instigating the insurgency in Kashmir. The most recent halt in bilateral cricket relations was triggered by the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks carried out by Lashkar-e-Taiba due to which all test matches have been suspended. This boycott is further cemented through the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) [preventing Pakistani players from participating in the Indian Premier League \(IPL\)](#), one of the world's biggest cricketing events. Unsurprisingly, allowing diplomatic relations to be mirrored so closely by sporting boycotts has significantly reduced their ability to act as a confidence-building measure. This is further diminished when one accounts for the fact that extensive governmental interference has resulted in India backing itself into a corner wherein any resumption of bilateral matches would mean appearing 'weak' on the terrorist threat widely believed to be posed by Pakistan. The only exception to these sports boycotts are international tournaments during which the need for points trump diplomatic tensions.

So how might the past of cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan help inform its present? The sport undoubtedly has a nearly unparalleled ability to draw the populations of two rival nations together as is illustrated by its historical record. Yet this ability to bridge differences is being compromised due to the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing populist political party that promotes aggressive Hindu chauvinism and systematically targets the Muslim minority within India. The consequent stoking of communal tensions has invariably lent itself to anti-Pakistan rhetoric, reducing the likelihood of cricket being used as a confidence-building measure at both the individual and state level. Indeed, be it the [trolling of India's only Muslim player](#) on India's T20 World Cup squad, Mohammad Shami, when they lost a match or the [arrests of Kashmiri students](#) for allegedly supporting the Pakistani team, the public mood during and after the few matches played on international platforms speak volumes of the extent to which tolerance has been diminished.



A second obstacle to the resumption of normalcy in cricket relations is posed by the [Kashmir Premier League](#), a cricket tournament the Pakistan Cricket Board initiated in 2021 in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). Given the tournament is named after a disputed territory and its marketing campaign doesn't shy away from using the word 'Azadi' (freedom), a term frequently associated with the Kashmiri insurgency against the Indian state, it comes as no surprise that India has far from welcomed this development. Indeed, it is understood that the [BCCI sought to prevent international players](#) like South African cricketer Herschelle Gibbs from participating in the tournament by stating his involvement could jeopardise chances of landing cricket-related assignments in India. This illustrates not only the BCCI's lack of independence, but also the potential international spillover of the conflict if third-parties are not careful. The extent of the former is underscored by the fact that Home Minister Amit Shah's son is the second most powerful person within the institution thus granting the national government direct access to its decision-making. At the time of writing, the 2022 KPL is set to proceed as planned and its President Arif Malik has announced he intends on sending a [formal invite to Indian cricketer Virat Kohli](#) to participate, or at least, visit as a spectator. We are yet to hear any response from the Indian side, but given the BCCI's substantial political muscle, it is highly unlikely that Kohli will be accepting the invitation. Thus, despite the vast potential of cricket to act as a confidence-building measure, it appears that the only role it will play in diplomatic relations in the near future is that of signalling animosity through its absence.





# AMERICAN FOOTBALL





# Colin Kaepernick and the NFL

*Caleb Adegbola*

In a pre-season game for the San Francisco 49ers in 2016, Colin Kaepernick [refused to stand](#) during the U.S. national anthem. This was done to protest against police brutality and racism in the U.S. Tensions across the US have remained constant due to regular police killings of African-Americans and Kaepernick believed there was a clear pattern of oppression against people of colour. In reverence of his political views, Colin Kaepernick carried his protests through to the regular season and continued to kneel during the national anthem. The move seems to have been inspired by Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, who also [sat down](#) during the national anthem as a Denver Nuggets player in the 90's. When Colin Kaepernick chose to use this passive form of protest it led to his unofficial expulsion from the league. With the Quarterback not being selected for any games [since the 1st of January 2017](#).

Taking the knee became an issue of great controversy and shortly after spread worldwide. Former president, Donald Trump considered it within his remit to intervene and [addressed the matter publicly](#). This demonstrated a clear clash between patriots and those who feel oppressed by a nation. Patriots considered the protests disrespectful, whilst others deemed taking the knee a valid and necessary response to oppression and systematic racism across the world. The death of George Floyd at the hands of Derek Chauvin, an officer of the Minneapolis Police department, sparked further protests across sports worldwide and brought prominence to the issue within multiple arenas. Most notably, the Premier League held several meetings to consider how players could show their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. With many choosing to kneel before games, players were given the freedom to make their own decisions. Wilfred Zaha, a British Crystal Palace player with Ivorian roots, chose to [eventually stop kneeling as](#) because felt the gesture had lost its meaning.

*“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of colour”*

Colin Kaepernick

When politics start to overshadow sports, organisations often prefer athletes refrain from outward gestures and not partake in activities that attract negative attention. Prior to the Tokyo Olympics, the IOC initially [banned athletes from taking the knee](#), or making alternative gestures, citing rule 50 of the Olympic charter which prohibits any kind of political, religious or racist demonstration. The committee eventually reversed its decision, [allowing athletes to kneel](#) before or after events. The most prominent backlash against taking the knee came from Hungarian fans during an international fixture against the English national football team when the squad decided to “take the knee” before the match began. [Children amongst the crowd were seen booing](#). The decision to punish Hungary with a [2 game ban for fans and 100,000 euro fine](#), received large scrutiny.



This topic fits within a larger trend of social issues and sport, and whether sports are an appropriate arena for these issues to be highlighted. Kneeling was chosen as a respectful method to protest during the national anthem rather than sitting down. It seems the majority of people find gestures acceptable but when athletes begin to speak out, they become shunned.



# TENNIS





# Wimbledon's decision to ban Russian and Belarusian tennis players

*Marco Zarzana*

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Wimbledon, the most prestigious tennis tournament in the world [decided to ban](#) Russian and Belarusian tennis players from competing at this year's tournament. In an official statement, the [All England Club](#) declared: "given the profile of The Championships in the United Kingdom and around the world, it is our responsibility to play our part in the widespread efforts of Government, industry, sporting and creative institutions to limit Russia's global influence through the strongest means possible." The All England Club added that "[it would be unacceptable for the Russian regime](#) to derive any benefits from the involvement of Russian or Belarusian players with The Championships." Wimbledon's chairman, Ian Hewitt, said that the tournament "[was left with no viable alternative](#)" but to ban Russian and Belarusian players, and strongly emphasised the UK government's directive [guidance and its role in shaping the decision](#).

The Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), the organisation governing men's tennis, and its women's equivalent, the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) have strongly criticised Wimbledon's decision. The ATP argued that discrimination on the basis of nationality [constituted a violation](#) of the organisation's agreement with Wimbledon, stating a player's entry is only based on ATP rankings. Similarly, the WTA's chief, Steve Simon, declared athletes competing in an individual sport "[should not be penalised](#) or prevented from competing solely because of their nationalities or the decisions made by the governments of their countries". Following this critique, the ATP and the WTA decided to [strip Wimbledon of ranking points](#).

After this decision, it has been confirmed that a strong motive for this measure was Wimbledon organisers' fear of the optics of World no. 2 Daniil Medvedev, a potential winner, being [pictured with the Royal Family](#), as traditionally happens with every winner of the tournament. The involvement of the Royal Family when it comes to presenting Wimbledon trophies is [commonplace: Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge directly presented the trophy to Novak Djokovic in 2019](#), and was present at the prize-giving ceremony last year. There was also a strong concern that the victory by a Russian or Belarusian player, along with them being pictured with members of the Royal Family, could be used by Putin to enhance the [propaganda machine of the Russian regime](#). Putin has flexed the power of the Russian state through sports in the past: a clear example being the [Sochi Olympics](#).

Wimbledon's ban on Russian and Belarusian players is a particularly interesting case because it demonstrates that non-state, private sport entities can further strengthen the foreign policy goals of their own countries. Hence, they should be considered additional tools that can further



social and political pressure on leaders committing [atrocious behaviour](#). This decision aligns with the majority of [global Western brands' leaving the Russian market](#), showcasing their condemnation of the war in Ukraine. Collectively, all these measures can be seen as further sanctions applied on a sub-state level and Wimbledon's ban is one layer of this within sport.

This case is unique because it demonstrates that when a specific sport organisation has a close institutional relationship with a state, it can become an asset that helps reinforce the foreign policy of a government's objectives. A key takeaway from this case study is that certain sports events, such as Wimbledon, only hosted in certain countries, can be leveraged by the country's they take place in to reinforce their foreign policy goals.



## Gaelic Football





# Gaelic football and Irish national identity

*Phaedon Angelopoulos*

GAA Football, or simply Gaelic Football, is the traditional national sport of Ireland, with the first reference of it dating back to 1308. It has since been played in Ireland, and every place where Irish immigrants settled, non-stop. Through the years it has acted as a strong force of national unity and identity among the Irish people, and has become the cause of ethnic tensions between them and the British.

In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, Gaelic Football rivalled “traditional” football, with the latter being regarded as a pro-unionist statement, via its history in the British military, and its English/Protestant roots. Belfast-based football presented a stark contrast to Kerry-based but also rather decentralised and unregulated Gaelic, as the sport of the imperialistic “[unpatriotic Protestants](#)” vs the sport of the people. As such, Gaelic Football became associated with the unionist / national identity. Clubs capitalised on the opportunity by enforcing the exclusive use of the [Irish language](#) and thus promoting the nationalist sentiment and Irish identity. The rising tensions between the British and the Irish culminated in the [Bloody Sunday](#) massacre in 1920. In response to an IRA attack against British Army officers, killing 15, the latter raided a Gaelic Football match and opened fire on players and spectators, killing 14 and injuring tens of others. While this was not the only instance of Gaelic being associated with inter-community violence, it is by far the most notable.

Since Irish independence and the end of British rule over the entire island of Ireland, Gaelic Football has slowly moved away from nationalist politicisation but has maintained and strengthened its place in the [Irish national identity](#). Specifically, the GAA is committed to maintaining and promoting Irish culture through language, music, and dancing. At the same time, it promotes inclusivity yet speaks of “imported games”, has a history of promoting the need for an “Irish Ireland” and has enforced rules that banned those who served in the British Armed Forces, or any [non-Irish sport](#) from playing Gaelic Games. While ‘The Ban’ stopped de-facto applying in the Republic (after its creation), it was still upheld [in Northern Ireland](#) until it was abolished in 2001 after the end of the troubles. Considering current British - Irish relations, it could be argued that the GAA is also a divisive force, rather than one seeking to promote the Irish national identity.

Yet, the GAA has never claimed to be an organisation beyond politics, making its allegiance clear from its inception, actively pursuing Irish republicanism and in the process becoming one of the most prominent and unique aspects of Irish identity. This, it seems, the people of Ireland have embraced. More than a million people attended the 2019 finals, pointing to the sport's immense popularity in Ireland and beyond. With clubs existing across the world and many of them being represented by people who have no ethnic connection to Ireland, it appears that Gaelic is acting as a vessel for the Irish identity, culture and heritage. As the GAA's [Alan Milton](#) remarked, “It’s never been about sport – it’s an expression of Irishness”.





From this we can conclude, especially when contrasted to football, Gaelic Football is a substantial part of the Irish identity. In a generation where a very few speak the Irish language as a mother tongue and have been subjected to a globalising world that is becoming increasingly more homogenous, it remains a strong connection with the past.

Despite the tumultuous history of Britain and Ireland, both sides have made great efforts to overcome it. As shown in the Brexit negotiations, the Irish issue was the main contention between the two sides, however, it has mostly been resolved with very [few instances](#) of violence. Even though it is natural and expected for there to be heightened tensions, the situation has very little in common with that of The Troubles, showing both sides are committed to maintaining peace and order, while trying to reach a solution that can appease all sides.

Beyond Ireland and Gaelic Football, similar circumstances surrounding sport can be found in any culture that has suffered the effects of colonialism. In such conditions, many instances of which can be found around the world, the act of participating in traditional sporting activities can simultaneously become an act of activism, protest and decolonisation.

