POPULAR GEOPOLITICS AND THE IDEOLOGICAL USE OF SPORTS

Anca DINICU, Dumitru IANCU

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania

anca_dinicu@yahoo.com, dorin_dan@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Globalization has benefits despite solid objections to the policies and regimes on which it is based on or the ongoing challenges it poses to the nation-state, weakening its authority and driving into world affairs the sub- and transnational spaces. These benefits include access to information on various topics through various means, including mass media communication. On the one hand, the paper enlightens the reader with the notion of popular geopolitics, demonstrating at the same time that we are not facing an entirely new phenomenon. On the other hand, it connects the attitude towards or during a major sporting event with the geopolitical context of that time to better understand world politics by the non-specialists in the field.*

Keywords: popular geopolitics, world politics, social media, sports

1. Introduction

Today, the *geopolitics* notion is highly accepted and so very prevalent in our language, regardless of the functional style used: scientific, journalistic, political, or artistic. Among these ways of expressing a product obtained through an intellectual-analytical or artistic-creative effort, the journalistic one is most often met due to the special accessibility we have to information, no matter of the field the subject belongs to or the source nature. Decoded and confirmed more or less and often generating subliminal messages, the information promoted through the journalistic style inevitably marks the way we (as citizen, nation, or country) perceive the world and understand the events on the international political stage.

2. Research Method

Focused on promoting and interpreting popular geopolitics as a method of explaining international politics in terms of geography, the research is based on a

literature review relevant to dealing with the aforementioned concepts. At the same time, it is to be mentioned that media was also a primary source of analysis and exemplification. The dualistic relationship between popular culture and popular geopolitics was considered relevant to demonstrate the broad access of individuals to international events. Basically, popular culture becomes the instrument and the common language of interpreting, in a more or less coherent and realistic way, the world politics.

3. Popular Geopolitics or the Individuals' Access to International Politics

The *geopolitics* concept is found mainly in the political statement, in the military briefing, or the comments of the foreign policy analyst, being specific to political decision and military strategy, areas in which it is perceived “as a vehicle for integrating geography and international politics” [1].

Even without having professional interests in learning how states implement their policies to promote national interests abroad or preoccupations related to interpreting international affairs, each of us has, at some point, come into contact with phrases such as geopolitical context, geopolitical location, geopolitical situation, geopolitical pivot, geopolitical option, geopolitical vacuum, geopolitical threat, etc. If, for professionals, semantics should not present problems, for the news consumers, especially the occasional one, the meaning of the term can be explained by the logic of common sense. Without knowing its "scientific truth", but being included in one of the phrases mentioned above with the help of which information is transmitted, and a mental picture regarding a concrete situation of politico-military nature is created, the audience more readily accepts the neologism, considering it a priori understood. Moreover, a minimum of knowledge held by a person who, without being a specialist but a person informed and passionate about the political phenomenon, allows the understanding even in a raw way of the geopolitical sarabande. In this regard, the following examples can be provided:

- “Biden ushers in a new era of climate geopolitics” [2];
- “The geopolitics of future normalization of Arab-Israeli relations” [3];
- “Battle to Retake Syrian City Turns into a Geopolitical Test of the War” [4];
- “Brexit: An unprecedented geopolitical shift” [5].

Other times, the situation is presented without resorting to the explicit use of the term, regardless of whether it is in substantive or adjective form, which does not exclude the evidence of the connotations by which it is translated. Thus, in a speech in West Berlin in June 1987, US President Ronald Reagan, taking advantage of the opening shown by the Kremlin, made a direct appeal to the demolition of the Berlin Wall, stating: “Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this

wall!” [6]. The Berlin Wall was physically dividing the city and had an extraordinary symbolic role, being the dividing line between the space characterized by liberal democracy and market economy and the one dominated by socialist democracy and the centralized state economy. Thus, the continent was split not only into two geographical regions but in two geopolitical regions - Eastern Europe and Western Europe. The collapse of the “fortress” generated a new geopolitical context not only at the European level but also globally, creating at the same time a power vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe, called by many commentators a “geopolitical vacuum”. This vacuum arose as a consequence of the removal of totalitarian regimes in the region amid the loss of ideological influence by the Soviets on socialist governments, the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact, and, finally, the implosion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Using two words specific to those times, we could say that too much “glasnost” [7] generated dramatic and fatal “perestroika” [8] for the European communist system.

As the process of globalization expanded beyond the classical realms (economic, first and foremost, but also political and military), by promoting and glorifying the rights of individuals to freedom of movement, conscience and expression, and the Internet “exploded” as an increasing number of people has gained access at this system that offers opportunities for instant information and communication, ignoring the distance, there has been a diversification of the area of interests and concerns of the world citizens who, under the avalanche of (real or propaganda) information, have come into contact with events that until two decades ago were not of particular interest. The phenomenon increased in magnitude through the “revolution” produced in political communication when politicians themselves have started to address directly through social media to their people, but

not only, thus making the transition from formal to popular political discourse.

Popular culture is hugely concerned today with world politics, an activity in a permanent dynamic, promoting interests and generating conflicts. Through a common language and based on images “with a strong emotional load”, appealing to the most varied forms of expression (television series and documentaries, music, comics and cartoons, written and social media), we are offered elements related to the world competition for power or the geopolitical game in the riotous regions of the world. The significant issues of nowadays are thus rendered to the world, most often under a cone of ideological light because popular culture, addressing the many who do not have an intellectual foundation in this respect, is still the product of some people who oscillate between being influencers or holders of the truth. The financial aspect of the artistic production/creation should not be neglected either, just as the producer's nationality, the language used, or the targeted audience are just as influential. Social platforms must also be approached from such perspectives, as they are private entities operating in a competitive social network market: “Facebook, Tweeter, YouTube, Google and so on are not only platforms but corporate entities, devoted not to public discourse and the encouragement of civic norms but to making a profit” [9]. Apart from this aspect, lately, some of them (such as Facebook and Twitter) show evident attitudes towards certain currents of thought and policies and have blocked messages and comments on specific topics or even deleted accounts.

There is, therefore, a two-way relationship - popular culture finds in daily existence subjects to exploit, and the great questions of world politics discover in popular culture a means of promoting their own truth or, as Robert A. Saunders and Vlad Strukov said, “the use of popular culture to construct and promote a specific worldview” [10]. On the other hand, according to the same

commentators, it is about “the dissolution of real politics in favor of hyper-mediated politics on the world stage” or even about the possibility that the boundary between reality and its interpretation to blur due to the feelings of uncertainty, fear or revolt developed among the audience. In other words, “popular geopolitics can quickly turn into unpopular geopolitics or populist geopolitics” [11].

4. Popular Geopolitics’ Meaning and Level of Novelty

Without being an exclusively new phenomenon, popular geopolitics refers to the daily consumption of world politics by the general public, and not only because the international political stage has become extremely tumultuous, but mainly as a result of “one-click” access to the international media and especially to social platforms. Popular geopolitics was born as geopolitics has escaped from the “big league”, where those in power make things move, and those with scholarly expertise explain the basis of the decision and reveal the direction of moving, and has entered the “local leagues” where the players are not necessarily professionals but amateurs passionate about foreign and international politics and who have access to them through traditional and digital media or other tools born from a process of artistic creation.

Dittmer and Bos conceptualize popular geopolitics under a double hypostasis - the daily type of geopolitics or “the subject matter” and the academic analysis of that daily geopolitics meant “to improving our understanding of that subject matter”: “Popular geopolitics is a niche within political geography wherein scholars study the everyday experience of geopolitics” [12]. Popular geopolitics is not a new phenomenon if we consider that written and audio-visual media approached international events even during the Cold War. What had characterized the news that referred directly or indirectly to the power

competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was that they were under the burden of ideological rivalry, constantly struggling to attract new nations in the battle of sphere of influence enlargement. If in the national spaces governed by a democratic system, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression were accepted and promoted [13], [14], [15], [16], in the states with totalitarian systems, the socialist order was followed and honored, including through the application of censorship and propaganda. The only chance for relatively accurate information the citizens of the communist states had was the Western broadcasting, primarily through Radio Free Europe, Radio Freedom, and Voice of America, without neglecting the propaganda role they also played.

What is specific to today's popular geopolitics is the existence of a much greater variety of tools to promote popular culture and primarily social media platforms. They have considerable advantages such as a huge audience, which favors, among other things, the wide dissemination of information and data, facilitating communication, or creating viral content. In the same time, they have their own limitation, such as: the use of sock puppets, meaning that “a false identity that is created as a deception so that the creator can manipulate the ideas posted” [17]; the difficulty especially for ordinary people “to know the background of open sources and the purpose of the public information to distinguish objective, factual information from information that lacks merit, contains bias, or is an effort to deceive the reader” [18].

When dealing with social media, it is essential always to remember that it relies on the network effect and so it “is capable of exercising power over large distances, but it is also continuously being formed through the wider array of relationships in which it is embedded” [19]. By presenting false information or lying by omission, constructing the message in such a way as to cast doubt on traditional media

information or immediately arouse interest in a particular cause, social media can become the tool to stimulate and enhance human instinct as a “political animal”.

5. Geopolitics and Sports. Olympic Games, the Playground for Political Confrontation

If during the Cold War *geopolitics* was thrown into the domain of forbidden knowledge being erased from universities and literature, while Washington and Moscow continued to play the geopolitical game, today we confront an overbidding of the term. It is geopolitics we resort to when we try to understand stock market fluctuations or various economic contexts, when we map the distribution of anti-Covid 19 vaccines worldwide or even find an explanation for the high or low scores obtained by a country at an international music contest or a justification for an attitude, behavior or action related to sports competition.

Regarding how geopolitics – international politics played in a particular geographical area – interferes with Sports, an aspect of human existence and activity that falls outside (security) strategy or (national) interest, and how international ascension or territorial-religious rivalry or geopolitical competition is translated into sports competition are best analyzed in connection with the Olympic Games, one of the supreme forms of Peace veneration. Such an event generates opportunities to promote an international concern issue because: the four-year distance between editions is enough time for tensions to appear; the Olympic Games can be transformed into a geopolitical trampoline through nationalist-extremist statements and attitudes; the presence of the international press is always an opportunity; usually high-level political representatives of nations participate in the opening or closing festivities of the Games. Throughout their existence, the modern Olympic Games have been under the shadow of the political phenomenon even though the International Olympic

Committee constantly denies this fact: “the Olympic Games are not about politics”. But it is quite difficult to separate them – the states are those that provide subsidies from the state budget for the national Olympic committees; the organization of the Olympic Games cannot be achieved without the government involvement; the event represents an extraordinary moment for the display of national pride; political nationalism is increasingly visible during these competitions, being strongly reflected in the international media; the host state takes advantage of the event to promote the strengths of its social system (high-performance education system; high-quality medical services based on solidarity and equity; progress in science and technology; steadily high rate of economic growth; tourism according to international standards); the country's political leadership may ban athletes from participating in the Games (as Jimmy Carter did by threatening to suspend passports if athletes did not obey, Moscow 1980).

Precisely through the special connection with international politics, some editions of the Olympic Games will remain in the collective memory and will be taken as landmarks in the analysis of the security environment or the geopolitical framework:

- 1936, Berlin, Hitler presented the image of a tolerant Germany in front of the international press, managing to hide the aggressive and racist agenda of its policy of territorial expansion [20];
- 1972, Munich, the massacre of the Israeli delegation by 5 five terrorists belonging to the PLO faction Black September [21];
- 1980, Moscow, the boycott of the Olympic competitions by the USA following the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR, in December 1979 [22];
- 1984, Los Angeles, the boycott of the Games by the Soviets and their allies, except for socialist Romania, invoking the safety of athletes as a result of alleged anti-Soviet demonstrations [23];

- 2018, Pyeong Chang / South Korea, edition for which the watchword was reconciliation [24], North Korea participating with a delegation led by the Pyongyang leader's sister.

A universal phenomenon and a social institution, present and practiced in all cultures, Sport offers a wide range of approaches, entering, among others, the area of interest of medicine, physics, sociology or psychology, and last but not least, politics. Based on rules, reflecting values, and responding to a social need, Sport comes to establish and promote regulations applicable to other social institutions. Or, as Nelson Mandela suggestively said during the Laureus World Sports Awards 2000, “Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, it has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination” [25]. This does not mean that it can change the course of international politics, not as a direct vector anyway, because power politics is played with more countable and tangible means.

Sport and government are social institutions. But do they function together harmoniously, sharing the same values, or are they bond due to the competition among them while trying to gain people's attention? The answer to this question must be contextualized according to the nature of the political regime and the relations established between social institutions, how government understands to use Sport (in fact, the results obtained in sports competitions, especially international ones) as a tool to promote itself or the country, and the importance Government is given to Sport as a non-essential activity in ensuring social development.

6. Conclusions

Understanding geopolitical movements is no longer strictly within the realm of the intellectual elite. Detaching itself from critical geopolitics, popular geopolitics is a way of understanding geopolitical discourse and attitude with the help of tools that favor popular culture. Social media platforms stand out as impact, not necessarily as the veracity of the approached issues, being a separate category of vectors of popular culture, different from traditional media, comics, and cartoons, movies, and music.

Sport is a field of activity governed by politics (at least in terms of legal framework, development strategies, or public policies that generally propose solutions to support the harmonious integration of Sport in society) and benefits the government and politicians (a deeper analysis would demonstrate, probably contrary to many expectations, that the nature of the political regime is not decisive in exploiting or not the sports competition victory in sustaining the political interest).

Sport, as history has already shown us, can be an area on which the struggle for power

at the international level translates, thus becoming a reason for national pride and an instrument of propaganda or intimidation of political opponents. Far from being played strictly for pleasure or for reasons related to health or aesthetics (professionalization in sports turning this activity into a real industry that swallows and produces also huge sums of money) and being by no means a field where competition takes place exclusively under the protection of the olive branch (being marked by racist attitudes, ethnic discrimination and social exclusion), Sport is built on and generates at the same time the most varied and contradictory feelings and attitudes, even expressing the rivalry in international affairs.

The benefits of Sport on the physical and mental state of people are numberless and well known. But Sport also benefits states, helping them increase their prestige internationally, making them known despite their poor economic performance or the weakness of the political system.

References List

- [1] Cohen, S.B., *Geopolitics. The Geography of International Relations*, Third Edition, Rowman and Littlefield, 2016, p.16.
- [2] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/04/23/biden-new-era-climate/>.
- [3] <https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/the-geopolitics-of-future-normalization-of-arab-israeli-relations-643284>.
- [4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/world/middleeast/battle-al-bab-syria-geopolitical-test.html>.
- [5] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36625209>.
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/jun/13/archive-1987-reagan-gorbachev-berlin-wall>.
- [7] The Russian word *glasnost* referred to the (social) *transparency* promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev in the second half of the 1980s in government institutions and civilian life in the Soviet Union.
- [8] The word *perestroika* designated another reform introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, at the same time as the one on transparency. The Soviet leader saw this restructuring to reduce corruption in the top leadership of the Communist Party and the Soviet government and moderate the abuse of power at the Central Committee level. It was believed that this reform of the party would lead to the reform of the Soviet economy and society.

- [9] Dittmer, J., Bos, D., *Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity*, Rowman & Littlefield, Second Edition, 2019, p.171.
- [10] Saunders, R.A., Strukov, V. (editors), *Popular Geopolitics. Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline*, Routledge, 2018, p.1.
- [11] Dodds, K., *Geopolitics. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.97.
- [12] Dittmer, J., Bos, D., *Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity*, Rowman & Littlefield, Second Edition, 2019, p. xix.
- [13] <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1218&context=honors>.
- [14] https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1403&context=asc_papers.
- [15] <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/10/archives/reflections-on-watergate-we-must-create-a-code-of-ethics-a-sign.html>.
- [16] <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/05/17/magazine/america-in-captivity.html>.
- [17] Prunckun, H., *Methods of Inquiry for Intelligence Analysis*, Rowman & Littlefield, Third Edition, 2019, p. 77.
- [18] Taylor, M.C., *Doctrine Corner: Open Source Intelligence Doctrine*, Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin 31, no. 4, October-December 2005, p. 14 apud Prunckun, H., *Methods of Inquiry for Intelligence Analysis*, Rowman & Littlefield, Third Edition, 2019, p. 77.
- [19] Dittmer, J., Bos, D., *Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity*, Rowman & Littlefield, Second Edition, 2019, p. 189.
- [20] <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-nazi-olympics-august-1936>.
- [21] <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/background-and-overview-munich-olympic-massacer>.
- [22] <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/qfp/104481.htm>.
- [23] <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/09/world/moscow-will-keep-its-team-los-angeles-olympics-tass-cites-peril-us-denies-it.html>.
- [24] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/world/asia/north-south-korea-olympics.html>.
- [25] <https://speakola.com/sports/nelson-mandela-laureus-lifetime-achievement-award-2000>.