Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary

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Abstract

Sport is often utilized as a tool by governments and nation-states in building a favorable international image, seeking external political legitimacy, and strengthening nation-building endeavors across borders. Given its universal appeal, sport is often perceived as a valuable soft power asset for conveying positive messages to foreign publics. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to introduce the sports diplomacy approach of Hungary, specifically focusing on the state-led utilization of sport in public diplomacy under the recent government of Viktor Orbán (2010–2020). With the institutionalization of sport in public diplomacy, Hungary has become a pioneering country in Central and Eastern Europe that can provide an example for other nation-states in the region. The Hungarian government's sports diplomacy ambitions have not been curbed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the country continues to invest large amounts of public funding in attracting and organizing international sporting competitions. Hosting the Summer Olympic Games in Budapest remains the ultimate goal of the current government's sports diplomacy strategy, which focuses on elite sport.

Key words: Hungary, sports diplomacy, public diplomacy, Viktor Orbán, COVID-19

Introduction

Public diplomacy can be defined as an “instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviors; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values” (Gregory, 2011, p. 343). According to Gilboa (2008), public diplomacy is used by policymakers to communicate with and influence foreign populations and their governments. In the academic literature, sports diplomacy is generally identified as part of the wide umbrella of state-led public diplomacy. Sports diplomacy is often described as the governmental utilization of “sportspeople and sporting events to engage, inform, and create a favorable image amongst foreign publics” (Murray, 2012, p. 581). Given its universal appeal, sport is often perceived as a valuable soft power asset and a cost-effective tool for conveying positive messages to foreign citizens (Garamvölgyi et al., 2020). This self-serving and instrumentalist utilization of sport by governments and their Ministries of Foreign Affairs has earned considerable academic attention over the past few decades. Various studies have focused on the application of mega-sport events for reaching foreign policy goals (Cornelissen, 2010; Nauright, 2013; Grix & Lee, 2013; Esherick et al., 2017; Knott, Fyall, &

Jones, 2017; Min & Choi, 2019), while international sporting successes are often considered as significant soft power opportunities through which states can project favorable external images (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). Emerging states and authoritarian regimes in particular reveal great interest in the organization of mega-sport events in order to showcase their identity to the global audience and to “cement the loyalty of their citizens to the system” (Horák, 2016, p. 50).

Despite the wealth of literature focusing on the application of elite sport in state-led diplomacies, the sports diplomacy approaches of small nation-states have often been neglected by academia. Sport’s role in post-socialist states’ foreign policy is a topic that has been given less attention within the academic field of sports and international relations. Central and Eastern European countries have especially been overlooked by researchers. Therefore, investigating the case of Hungary could foster an understanding of how relatively small, post-socialist states strive to take advantage of sport as a political tool for raising their international profile and strengthening their external image and foreign relations. By introducing the case of Hungary, the present paper aims to fill a gap in the rapidly expanding academic literature of sports diplomacy. To bring in new research perspectives, the paper also reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Hungarian government’s plans for hosting more large-scale international sporting competitions.

Methods

The methodology of the present study was based on policy and document analysis. In the first step, academic publications concerning the utilization of sport in foreign affairs in Hungary were screened. Second, publicly available governmental policy documents and communications on endeavors related to sports diplomacy were collected and evaluated. Third, relevant domestic and international online media archives from between 2010 and 2020 were gathered and analyzed. The limitations of the present study partly derived from the scarce amount of relevant academic literature and the limited availability of governmental policy documents. Therefore, the paper represents an attempt to understand the Hungarian practice of sports diplomacy from an international perspective and also highlights the government’s recent approach to tackling the challenges posed by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The Orbán government’s sports policy: a brief overview (2010–2020)

Since 2010, sport has played a “national strategic role” in Hungary (Sárközy, 2013). The Orbán-led government has devoted considerable political and financial support to the sports sector, which, according to many, can be attributed to the prime minister’s love for sports, especially football. As a consequence, the sports sector received major funding from the state, and companies sponsoring “spectator sports” began to take advantage of tax credits (Bozóki, 2016). The overarching sports policy goal is to make Hungary a sporting nation while maintaining its sports nation status. The Fidesz¹-KDNP (Christian Democratic People’s Party) government of the period between 2010 and 2020 took several measures to this end, especially with regards to elite sport development. Key sports policy actions include the gradual introduction of daily physical education in public education, a major stadium and sports facility construction program, and the corporate income tax relief system (TAO) to support grassroots sports infrastructure development and youth sport. The emphasis on sport as a sector of national priority also has an impact on the government’s foreign relations strategy and diplomatic relations. Sport as a means of gaining international prestige and reputation is encompassed by the foreign policy of the Hungarian government reflecting the concept of “traditional sports diplomacy” (Murray, 2018).

Orbán’s sports-oriented governance comes at a substantial price for the Hungarian economy. By 2020, the Fidesz-KDNP government built or renovated at least 32 football stadiums at a cost of approximately 215 billion Hungarian forints (601 million euro) from public funds, as estimated by the Hungarian investigative news portal Átlátszó (Csepregi, 2016). At the same time, the government has made donations to sports clubs tax deductible, and money is pouring into government officials’ favorite football clubs and academies (Bayer, 2017). The TAO system was approved by the European Commission in 2011 and extended in 2017, allowing all corporations subject to corporate income tax in Hungary to donate up to 70% of their corporate tax to six “spectator sports” (football, handball, basketball, water polo, ice hockey, and volleyball, which was added in 2017) to gain two types of tax benefits. Between 2011 and 2020, sports federations and associations raised 790 billion forints (2.209 billion euro), about 40% of which went to football (Bita & Pető, 2020). In addition to several civil society organizations voicing

¹ Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance, the political party led by Viktor Orbán.

their disquiet at the high risk of corruption and lack of transparency surrounding the TAO system, there are many other concerns (European Parliament, 2017). Puskás Academy, a football club that was funded by Viktor Orbán, has largely benefited from the TAO system. It is estimated that the club has raised over 32 billion forints (89.5 million euro) in TAO support (Bita & Pető, 2020).

Sport in Hungary's public diplomacy (2010–2020)

Hungarian non-governmental sports diplomacy reflects centuries-old traditions. Hungarian sports diplomats² have long played key roles in developing the international sports movement: they contributed to the establishment of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the first European university sports association. Concerning government-led sports diplomacy, the 20th century provided various examples in terms of the interactions between sport and politics, foreign policy, and diplomacy. These cases include the relocation of the 1920 Olympic Games from Budapest to Antwerp, the Rákosi era's communist sports policy in the early 1950s, and the Olympic boycott of 1984. Nonetheless, the development of the modern version of governmental sports diplomacy has gained momentum since 2010, with an emphasis on sport as a sector of national strategy. Based on the analysis of sports policy documents and the publicly available communications of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Ministry of Human Capacities (hosting the State Secretariat for Sports), the Hungarian government's sports diplomacy strategy is organized along five major pillars.

1. Improving the image of Hungary through the organization of international sports events and conferences

In the international context, the cornerstone of Orbán's sports policy is to host as many sporting competitions as possible. Between 2010 and 2020, several large-scale international sports events were organized in the country, not least due to the government's financial guarantees. According to Máté and András (2016), Hungary hosted 109 international sports events between the 2012 London Olympic Games and the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. Based on the statistics of the State Secretariat for Sports, the Hungarian government co-financed the organization of 34 international sports events in 2010 compared to 113 in 2017 (Stocker, 2018). According to the government's communications, it is believed that the organization of large-scale international sporting events can help promote Hungary's brand and positively influence the image of the country. As a matter of fact, the president of the International Swimming Federation (FINA) called the 2017 World Aquatics Championships hosted by Budapest and Balatonfüred in 2017 the best championships in the history of the event (Abouthungary.hu, 2017). During the competition, Viktor Orbán stated that "apart from the FIFA World Cup, which is another matter, there's no major world event that is beyond Budapest's capabilities" (Bayer, 2017). The prime minister's proclamation aimed to provide high-level political support for Budapest's bid to host the 2024 Summer Olympic Games. Arguably, the organization of the Summer Olympics in Hungary represents the ultimate sports diplomacy goal of Viktor Orbán.

Capitalizing on the government's support and financial guarantees, the Hungarian sports federations started to invest considerable efforts in bidding for major European and international sports competitions. In 2017, besides the FINA World Aquatics Championships (Budapest), the European Youth Olympic Festival (Győr), and the Judo World Championships (Budapest), several other competitions were hosted in Hungary. In 2018, Budapest organized the World Wrestling Championships. Then, in 2019, the city hosted the World Table Tennis, Pentathlon, and Fencing Championships, as well as the European Maccabi Games, the World Urban Games, and the UEFA Women's Champions League Final. In the same year, Budapest held the title of the European Capital of Sport, awarded by the European Capitals and Cities of Sport Federation (ACES Europe). Although the 2020 Swimming European Championships and the games of the 2020 UEFA Football Championship were postponed, the UEFA Super Cup was organized in September 2020 in the new Puskás Aréna, which was inaugurated a year earlier. In 2023, the Hungarian capital will host the IAAF World Athletics Championships, one of the most well-known global sports events. According to Tamás Menczer, the state secretary for communication and the international representation of Hungary, "these world competitions have one by one improved Hungary's international image and sports diplomacy aspirations" (Kormany.hu, 2019).

Besides sporting competitions, the Fidesz-KDNP government has been backing the organization of sport-themed international conferences. One prominent example is the reception of the 62nd FIFA Congress in 2012. The last time Budapest hosted the event was in 1930, when the world governing body of football only had 27 member organizations (Diplomacy & Trade, 2012). In November 2016, the Council of Europe's 14th Conference of Ministers responsible for Sport took place in the Hungarian capital. The event was attended by the ministers or representatives

² E.g., Ferenc Kemény, Ferenc Mező, Árpád Csanády, and István Gyulai.

of 42 European countries, 5 observer states, and more than 25 sports organizations. The main focus points of the agenda involved the fight against doping, match-fixing, and good governance. More recently, the International Sports Press Association's (AIPS) 83rd Congress was hosted in the Hungarian capital in February 2020, as was the International University Sports Federation (FISU) World Forum's latest edition in August 2020. Although the COVID-19 global pandemic pushed the FISU forum online, it was still attended by 1,500 participants, including 600 university students from 105 countries (Koo, 2020).

2. Sport as a tool for strengthening international relations

Sport is often described as a popular and accessible platform of communication that easily overcomes cultural barriers and ethnic-national divides. Viktor Orbán considers sport, in particular football, as an impactful tool for establishing and building diplomatic relations, as well as strengthening the Hungarian national identity in the Carpathian Basin. International sporting competitions and sport-based investments create opportunities to strengthen inter-state relations and, in the case of neighboring countries, relations among ethnic Hungarians as well. Over the past decade, several state leaders and politicians have taken advantage of sporting competitions to conduct high-level political meetings in Budapest. Russian President Vladimir Putin is a regular guest in the Hungarian capital. On the occasion of the 2017 World Judo Championships, Putin visited Orbán for the second time to conduct strategic negotiations while observing the performance of Russian judokas. Ahead of the FIFA World Cup Final in Moscow in 2018, Orbán made an official visit to the Kremlin and praised the Russian organization of the largest football event. Aside from governmental negotiations dressed up as sports diplomacy, the Hungarian prime minister often welcomes international sports leaders, from Thomas Bach (IOC) to Aleksander Čeferin (UEFA), in his office.

Over the last decade, the Fidesz-led government has made considerable efforts to boost the development of sports infrastructure not only in Hungary, but also in neighboring countries. Between 2013 and 2018, the Hungarian state invested approximately 16 billion forints (45 million euro) in football academies located in Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia (Oroszi & Sipos, 2018). At the inauguration event of the TSC Football Academy in Topola (Topolya), Serbia, the prime minister stated that sport is “Central Europe’s common language” that brings together Serbs and Hungarians (Halász-Szabó, 2018). At the inauguration of the MOL Football Academy in Dunajská Streda (Dunaszerdahely), Slovakia, Orbán echoed that “sport is an excellent link between the people and countries of the Carpathian Basin” (Kormany.hu, 2018a). Despite these statements stressing the role of sport in regional diplomacy, Molnar and Whigham (2021) argue that the Orbán government’s extra-territorial sporting investments are mere attempts to reconstruct the Hungarian nation, which “invokes ethnically rooted nationalism” (p. 144). The authors contend that Orbán envisions the Hungarian nation in its pre-Trianon form, adopting an irredentist stance to “re-connect Magyars inside and outside of Hungary” (Molnar & Whigham, 2021, p. 143).

3. Representation of Hungarian sports interests in international sports federations

Ensuring adequate national representation in international sports federations is understood as a basic condition for attracting international sports competitions to Hungary. Although it is not specifically the competence of the state-led sports administration, the Hungarian government has actively supported the nomination and election of sports leaders into the executive committees and decision-making bodies of European and international sports federations. One recent example is the election of Dr. Tünde Szabó, the secretary of state responsible for sports, as the vice president of the European Swimming League (LEN) in November 2020. Szabó, an Olympic, World, and European Championship silver medalist backstroker, is also a member of the governing Fidesz party. Another prominent example is Hungary’s richest businessman, Sándor Csányi, chairman-CEO of OTP Bank, who was elected deputy chair of FIFA in 2018. Mr. Csányi, who has headed the Hungarian Football Federation since 2010, is an important ally of Viktor Orbán (Vass, 2018).

Aján and Némethné Móra (2006) estimated that 74 Hungarians held 106 different positions in international sports federations in 2006. The authors claimed that this number was relatively high in comparison to Hungary’s population, but could be justified by the sports diplomacy traditions of the country. Despite the traditionally high representation of Hungarian sports leaders in international sports federations, recent data have shown a decreasing trend. According to the Sports Political Power Index,³ Hungary’s position has weakened by 3 points between 2013 and 2019, meaning that fewer Hungarians were elected to executive boards of international sports federations. Following the resignation of Dr. Tamás Aján as the president of the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), the number of elected Hungarian sports leaders further decreased in 2020. Nevertheless, some developments occurred over the same period in terms

³ <https://www.dif.dk/en/politik/nyheder/powerindex>

of the representation of Hungary in the executive bodies of continental sports federations, which reflects the general trends of shifting sports-related political power from Western to Eastern European countries.

Besides backing the nomination of Hungarian sports diplomats, the government aims to attract international sports organizations to relocate their headquarters to Hungary. On April 2, 2019, the National Assembly adopted the amendment of the 2004 Act on Sport, thus creating the legal possibility for international sports federations to settle in Hungary. Compared to other non-governmental organizations, the law gives the international sports federation a great deal of freedom to determine the content of its founding document and the internal rules of its operation. In addition to modifying the Act on Sport, a tax-benefit scheme was introduced to provide a favorable operational environment. The introduction of such legal and fiscal benefits opened the doors to the International Judo Federation (IJF), which relocated its headquarters to the Hungarian capital in 2019 (Vass, 2019). More recently, the General Assembly of the International Federation of Teqball (FITEQ) decided to transfer its official seat from Lausanne to Budapest (Fiteq.org, 2020c).

4. Representing the interests of Hungarian sports companies and inventions abroad

According to Marton et al. (2015), economic interests have considerable influence on sports policy development and sports diplomacy in the 21st century. Given the sports sector's national strategic role in Hungary, its economic and innovative aspects have also come to the fore since 2010. Supporting the foreign acquisitions of Hungarian sports companies and promoting Hungarian sports products and innovations abroad are also endeavors of the Hungarian government's sports diplomacy. In the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the international acquisitions of sports companies can indirectly contribute to strengthening Hungary's international reputation and image. One of the prominent Hungarian sports inventions is teqball, a new football-based sport played on a specially curved table. On the occasion of the Teqball World Championships of 2019, which took place in Budapest, the International Teqball Federation signed an agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Based on the deal, 200 teqball tables were donated to "philanthropic projects and organizations" around the world, popularizing the sport of teqball and strengthening the image of Hungary (Fiteq.org, 2020a). Hungarian embassies took an active role in the promotion of the new sport and supported the organization of bilateral sports meetings where the invention was introduced. In November 2020, FITEQ was granted full membership of the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF), which marked a significant milestone for the governing body of teqball and para-teqball (Fiteq.org, 2020b).

Between 2015 and 2018, the Sports Diplomacy Division of the Hungarian National Chamber of Commerce supported the foreign acquisitions of Hungarian sports enterprises. In 2018, the role of the Hungarian National Chamber of Commerce was taken over by the Hungarian Export Development Agency Nonprofit Ltd. Sport is perceived as a tool to reach the goals of the "Eastern and Southern opening" foreign policy strategies initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to develop and strengthen investment ties with emerging countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Between 2010 and 2020, a number of such bilateral agreements were established in the field of sport. The secretary of state for sport is in charge of developing inter-ministerial cooperation agreements such as the Hungarian-Cuban (Kormany.hu, 2017a), Hungarian-Iranian (Kormany.hu, 2017b), and Hungarian-Vietnamese (hanoi.mfa.gov.hu, 2020) bilateral sports and youth declarations of intent.

5. Ex-athletes and sports journalists in diplomatic positions

The Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade is increasingly taking advantage of successful athletes' popularity. Since 2010, several sportsmen have been appointed to influential roles in the state's administration and diplomacy. Shortly after the landslide election success of Fidesz-KDNP in 2010, Pál Schmitt, an internationally well-known former Olympic champion fencer, ex-ambassador to Switzerland and Spain, and member of the International Olympic Committee, was nominated as Hungary's president. In 2012, Schmitt resigned following an academic misconduct controversy concerning his doctoral thesis, submitted in 1992 (Sullivan, 2015). Despite his failure, Schmitt did not fully withdraw from public commitments; in 2015, he was appointed by Commissioner Tibor Navracsics (a member of the Fidesz party) to lead a high-level group of experts in evaluating the role of sport in the European Union's foreign affairs and provide advice on how sport could contribute to reaching the EU's foreign policy goals (Sullivan, 2015).

Péter Szijjártó, ex-futsal player and minister of foreign affairs and trade since 2014, pays much attention to Hungarian sporting achievements as a means to conduct public diplomacy. While he likes to be portrayed with Hungarian sports celebrities, Szijjártó often highlights the growing stature of Hungary in the sporting world. He has appointed a number of ex-athletes to diplomatic roles, such as Miklós Gór-Nagy, the world champion water

polo player who embarked on a diplomatic mission to New York in 2020. Ottó Vincze, an ex-football player, was commissioned by Szijjártó to “process the Hungarian heritage in Barcelona” as a sports diplomacy consultant. The minister justified his choice by saying that Vincze was the last Hungarian player to compete in FC Barcelona’s adult team (Fekő, 2020). In 2019, Hungary’s former Olympic champion swimmer and IOC member Dániel Gyurta was named as a senior advisor of sports diplomacy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Morgan, 2019). Moreover, the former captain of the Hungarian national football team, Balázs Dzsudzsák, received a diplomatic passport that he kept even after continuing his football career in the Hungarian second division (Fekő, 2020).

Besides well-known athletes, Szijjártó appointed György Szöllősi, editor-in-chief of the Hungarian sports daily *Nemzeti Sport* and president of the Hungarian Sports Journalists’ Association, as a diplomat representing the legacy of the country’s most revered football player, Ferenc Puskás. Szöllősi is officially named as the “ambassador of Hungarian football tradition and affairs concerning the heritage of Ferenc Puskás,” which has no parallel with any conventional diplomatic roles. In 2019, Szöllősi was elected as the vice president of AIPS Europe, the European branch of the International Sports Press Association. Besides Szöllősi, former Olympic gymnast and vice president of the Hungarian Sports Journalists’ Association, Zsuzsa Csisztu, was elected as a member of the Executive Committee of AIPS.

Making Hungary great again? the olympic dreams of Viktor Orbán

For a long time, Orbán’s ultimate sports policy and nation-building goal has been the organization of the Olympic Games in Hungary. The prime minister looks at Hungarian Olympic sporting achievements as the expression of the quest for national identity and determination. At the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games in 2016, he declared that during the 20th century Hungarians found their sole source of joy in Olympic medals, and “sporting success was the only way they could show their determination to see the nation’s flag flying high and proud above the field of play” (Kormany.hu, 2016). In 2016, one of the pro-government online news portals paralleled Orbán’s Olympic ambition to Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” presidential campaign and called for action with the slogan “Dare to dream big!” (Topolansky, 2016). The government’s communication channels depicted the Olympic plans as “the passion of Hungarian people,” a “desire by the nation to revive itself,” and “a long-coveted boost to the nation’s psyche.” Moreover, it was argued that Hungary was the only country among the 10 most successful countries in the Summer Olympics yet to host the event (Topolansky, 2016).

The idea of organizing the Summer Olympic Games in Budapest was not first conceived by the current political and sports leadership; bids were introduced for the 1916, 1920, 1936, 1944, and 1960 games. The Hungarian capital would have hosted the global sport event in 1920, the year of the Trianon Treaty following World War I. However, the defeated country was not even invited, and the event was relocated to Antwerp. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Olympic aspirations were resurrected through the establishment of the Budapest Olympic Movement in 2005. Initially, the 2020 Olympics were targeted; however, the bid was only entered into the competition for the 2024 games. The idea was fully backed by the government, and Orbán argued the time had arrived for Hungary to host the event. The prime minister emphasized that the “organization of the Budapest games would also help lay new foundations for the Olympic movement, as if a medium-sized city were given the opportunity to host the games with a medium-sized budget, other medium-sized cities could also dream of hosting future Olympics” (Kormany.hu, 2016). In the views of Orbán, the IOC’s Agenda 2020 represented the ultimate opportunity for smaller countries like Hungary to act as an example for organizing a global event on a small budget.

The Hungarian prime minister’s Olympic dreams were shattered by an emerging political movement called Momentum, which collected 266,151 signatures to hold a local referendum among the citizens of Budapest regarding the bid. Momentum argued the collection of signatures was also motivated by the goal that no decision should be made on a gigantic investment without the public being asked in advance (Székely, 2017). The success of the “Nolimpia” campaign forced the Hungarian government to pass a resolution proposing the City of Budapest and the Hungarian Olympic Committee to withdraw the bid. In fact, the outcome of the referendum was not predictable. Despite the gradual decrease in the ratio of those supporting the bid, with political preferences being the main background factor (Dóczi, 2015), it still appeared to be a close race. According to a representative survey conducted during the Rio Olympics, 45% of the Hungarian population would have supported the organization of the games in Hungary, while 50% were against it (Publicus.hu, 2016). Nevertheless, in a radio interview, Orbán went on to contend that the bid had to be withdrawn in order to avoid humiliating the country and argued that the Momentum Movement’s political ambitions had resulted in the “murdering of dreams” (Novak, 2017).

Despite the withdrawal of the Olympic bid, the prime minister did not give up on his dreams. The Puskás Aréna, the new national football stadium with a capacity of close to 68,000 seats, was officially inaugurated in November

2019, costing the Hungarian taxpayers a total of 190 billion forints (531 million euro; Hvg.hu, 2020). The day before the inauguration, the prime minister published a short video on his Facebook page revealing the football skills of top Hungarian politicians such as Secretary of State Balázs Fűrjes (responsible for the construction of the stadium), Minister of Justice Judit Varga (a former football player), and finally himself, kicking a ball on the balcony of his office at the Carmelite Monastery while reading *Nemzeti Sport*, his favorite sports daily (Kaszás, 2019). Although the new leadership of Budapest campaigned with the enforcement of a “stadium stop” in the city, in 2019 the government made a deal for the construction of a new athletics stadium hosting the 2023 IAAF World Athletics Championships. According to the existing plans, by 2024 most of the future Olympic facilities will have been inaugurated, and Budapest will be ready to be considered for a new Olympic bid.

The institutionalization of the government-led sports diplomacy

Prior to the April 2018 parliamentary elections, the External Relations Coordination Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade was responsible for carrying out the ministry’s sports diplomacy tasks and providing the Hungarian embassies with up-to-date information on sports-related matters. During the bidding process of the 2024 Olympic Games, the department facilitated the communication between Budapest 2024 Nonprofit Ltd., the Hungarian Olympic Committee, and the Hungarian embassies. The primary task of the department was to satisfy the information needs of the foreign missions and grant timely communication and background materials related to Budapest’s Olympic bid. The department also contributed to the organization of the 150th anniversary of Hungarian-Japanese bilateral relations, which featured friendly sports games between the two nations and presented Japanese martial arts, such as karate and kendo (Buzna, 2018).

Following the 2018 parliamentary elections, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade underwent an organizational transformation, resulting in the establishment of the State Secretariat for Communication and Hungary’s International Image and the appointment of former sports reporter Tamás Menczer as the secretary of state (Kormany.hu, 2018b). With the formation of a new Sports Diplomacy Department, sport was given an even more prominent role in public diplomacy. The tasks of the Department of Sports Diplomacy were defined by the 17/2018 decree on the Organizational and Operational Regulations of the Ministry. Menczer, who supervises the field, stated that sport can open doors to places in the world where Hungary has not yet established a major presence. He expressed that sport as a tool for diplomacy can help overcome political debates and controversies, as it is “easier to resolve disputes based on trust built through sport” (Sinkovics, 2018). In October 2019, one year after the establishment of the department, the secretary of state announced that 200 sports diplomacy projects had already been delivered by the division (Kormany.hu, 2019). Although there is no publicly available database of these projects, according to the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, sports diplomacy programs have been implemented in China (Hangzhou), Kazakhstan (Nur-Sultan), Pakistan (Islamabad), and Italy (Rome and Vercelli), among others. Many of these initiatives featured teqball as a means of establishing and strengthening international relations.

Hungarian sports diplomacy during the times of COVID-19

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the sports sector in Europe and worldwide. Hungary was one of the first European countries to impose a full border closure in March 2020 to curb the spread of the virus. The first wave of the pandemic thwarted the organization of international sports events hosted by Hungary, such as the 2020 UEFA Football Championships (Budapest is still one of the host cities and is prepared to host the games in 2021), the 2020 Swimming European Championships, and the Giro D’Italia cycling competition that was supposed to be launched from Budapest. Compared to other European countries, Hungary got through the first wave with relatively few casualties. With the early relaunch of sports leagues, the country was among the first to re-open the doors of stadiums for fans. While spectators were not allowed to return to football grounds in most of Europe, there were no restrictions on attending sporting events in Hungary between August and October 2020. Although travel restrictions were re-imposed in September, athletes or managers accredited to international sporting competitions hosted by Hungary were treated equally as Hungarian citizens and were exempted from strict regulations. Organized on September 24, 2020, the UEFA Super Cup was a major “pilot test” to bring football fans back into the stadiums. The governing body of European football “has ruled that up to 30 percent of the 67,215-seat Puskás Aréna can be taken by fans, with 3,000 tickets available for the supporters coming from abroad” (Kató, 2020). The organization of the game was opposed by political and civil groups, but the government persisted. Another example of Hungary’s “pandemic sports diplomacy” concerns the organization of the International Swimming League (ISL). Over 300 world-class swimmers traveled to the Hungarian capital to compete in the second season of ISL, which took place between October 16 and November 22, 2020. The event was held behind closed doors while athletes

spent six weeks in the Budapest bubble with strict regulations concerning health and safety standards. Although the Hungarian government introduced strict measures on November 9, 2020, the ISL competitions went on and were concluded with success. After the second wave of the virus hit the country heavily, the government kept pouring public funds into international sports competitions taking place behind closed doors, such as the group games of the European professional water polo club competition, the LEN Champions League. Benefiting from an additional 1 billion forints in state aid, the Hungarian Water Polo Federation claimed that it was in the “outstanding sports diplomacy interest of Hungary” to host the first significant international water polo event after the shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pető, 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

Since 2010, sport has played a national strategic role in Hungary. The Fidesz-KDNP government has invested considerable financial assets in elite sport and sporting infrastructure. The relevance of sport in the domain of foreign policy and international relations has rapidly increased. Large-scale international sporting competitions became an integral part of the state-led public diplomacy endeavors. Arguably, elite sport events and international sporting success are seen as soft power assets to raise international visibility and create a more favorable external image of the country. With the recent establishment of the Sports Diplomacy Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hungary has become a pioneer in the Central and Eastern European region for institutionalizing sports diplomacy in the administration of its foreign affairs. Despite the absence of a publicly available sports diplomacy strategy, the government has taken an active role in utilizing sports, sporting competitions, and athletes to reach foreign policy goals. International sporting competitions are the backbone of Viktor Orbán’s sports diplomacy, which ultimately aims to pave the way for hosting the Olympic Games in Budapest. In spite of the failure of the 2024 Olympic bid, public investment in the country’s sports infrastructure has continued to thrive in recent years, and not even the COVID-19 pandemic has been able to halt the organization of international sporting competitions. If the 2023 IAAF World Athletics Championships are successfully organized in Budapest, the future political leadership can easily claim that the country is ready to host the largest summer multisport event in the world.

Concerning the wider international framework, a growing number of governments aim to innovate the toolkits of their foreign policy and diplomacy. Due to its universal nature and global popularity, sport can be an appealing soft power asset to governments and their Ministries of Foreign Affairs. As introduced above, the approach of Hungary can be considered as one of the leading examples in the Central and Eastern European region. However, the utilization of sport in public diplomacies is driven by more powerful and wealthier states, such as the United States (SportsUnited program), Australia (the first country to publicly introduce its sports diplomacy strategy), France (host of the 2024 Summer Olympics), Japan (host of the 2020/21 Summer Olympics), or Qatar (host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup). As a small post-socialist country, Hungary can mainly rely on its rich sporting heritage, sports-based innovations, and the high-level education of the new generation of sports leaders. Regarding the latter, some Hungarian institutions of higher education have already made important progress in developing their curricula in the field of sports diplomacy. Despite these efforts, the number of elected Hungarian sports leaders in the main decision-making bodies of international sports federations seems to have decreased in the last decade, which could impact the country’s global sports power aspirations and bidding capacities for future competitions. It remains a question as to what extent future sports diplomats will be recruited from these graduate programs, as opposed to the current practice of appointing former elite athletes to leadership positions. Additionally, and perhaps as a result of this, the Hungarian approach remains focused on elite sport, whereas grassroots sport and sport-based development have not yet been discovered as possible elements of the Hungarian sports diplomacy strategy. We believe these issues are worth exploring to further strengthen the relevance and utilization of sport as a tool in state-led public diplomacy.

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