



DEVELOPMENT OF EU SPORT DIPLOMACY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EU SPORT DIPLOMACY STRATEGY 4

The Council of the European Union 5

The European Commission 5

The European Parliament 6

2. ANALYSIS OF THE STRENGTHS OF THE EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR ON SPORT DIPLOMACY 8

Europe: A Sporting Heritage 8

Unity in Diversity: National Sport Diplomacy Strategies 9

The EU as a Diplomatic Actor 10

The Availability of Existing Budgets 10

Existing Strengths in Cultural and Educational Diplomacy 11

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE EU AS GLOBAL ACTOR IN THE FIELD 13

Relations with Sports Bodies 13

Speaking With One Voice 14

Framing the Messaging 16

The Development of an Organisational Culture of Sport Diplomacy 17

CONCLUSION 18

BIBLIOGRAPHY 19

DEVELOPMENT OF EU SPORT DIPLOMACY

INTRODUCTION

As is highlighted in a previous publication from the Towards a European Union Sport Diplomacy (TES-D) project funded by the European Union (EU), sport diplomacy can be employed as a tool for nation branding, as a means of normalising or reinforcing diplomatic relations and as a mechanism for peace and development.¹ An increasing number of states are realising the value of adopting a sport diplomacy strategy in order to guide key actors in the attainment of these goals. The Australian and U.S. sport diplomacy strategies are considered to represent best strategic practice in the field.² The present paper explores the opportunities and challenges facing the EU in the construction of its own strategic approach to sport diplomacy.

In May 2021, European Commissioner Mariya Gabriel stated that even though the EU “[has] well established actions in the field of sports diplomacy, we have to admit the lack of a real strategy like United States or China have”.³ This paper first reviews the actions taken by the EU to develop a diplomatic persona in the field of sport. It claims that without greater strategic direction, EU initiatives risk becoming ad hoc and directionless. Second, the paper argues that there are grounds for optimism as to why the EU should adopt a strategic approach to EU sport diplomacy: Europe has a great sporting heritage; the EU can draw on and assist with emerging Member State sport diplomacy strategies; the EU is emerging as a prominent diplomatic actor; it has a range of existing instruments that can be deployed to implement a strategy; and it has expertise in related fields, notably cultural and education diplomacy. Finally, the paper acknowledges some challenges the EU must overcome for a sport diplomacy strategy to emerge, notably how the EU should structure relations with sports bodies; how to speak with one voice; how messaging should be presented; and how an organisational culture of sport diplomacy can be developed.

¹ IRIS et al (2021), *Sport Diplomacy: A Literature Review of Scholarly and Policy Sources*. Accessed at: https://www.tes-diplomacy.org/pdf/TES-D_Literary_review.pdf

² Parrish, R. (2021), *Case Studies of Non-EU Sport Diplomacy: United Kingdom, United States, Australia, China & Qatar*. Accessed at: https://www.tes-diplomacy.org/pdf/TES-D_Desk_research.pdf

³ Speech by Commissioner Mariya Gabriel at the Sport Council - Sport diplomacy in the context of EU external relations - policy debate, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/gabriel/announcements/speech-commissioner-mariya-gabriel-sport-council-sport-diplomacy-context-eu-external-relations_en

1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EU SPORT DIPLOMACY STRATEGY

In the 2007 White Paper on Sport, the European Commission stated that “*sport can play a role regarding different aspects of the EU’s external relations: as an element of external assistance programmes, as an element of dialogue with partner countries and as part of the EU’s public diplomacy*”. Two years later, with the adoption of Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, known as the Lisbon Treaty, the EU committed to develop “*the European dimension in sport*” and to “*foster cooperation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the field of education and sport*”. Article 165 therefore set aside any doubt that the EU was not competent to develop a sport diplomacy strategy.

In 2015, European Commissioner Tibor Navracsics took the first steps towards developing EU sport diplomacy by establishing a High-Level Group (HLG) on Sport Diplomacy. The HLG, three of its members being partners in this TES-D project, issued a report with 15 recommendations covering external relations, major sport events and organisational culture of sport diplomacy.⁴ In terms of external relations, the HLG experts recommended that the EU:

- Include sport in the agreements of EU with third countries;
- Examine the extension of Erasmus+ programme to non-EU Member States;
- Provide technical and policy support to third country public authorities and sports organisations implementing sports-based projects;
- Organise a top-level sport diplomacy conference and keep/improve relations with relevant sports bodies, stakeholders and Council of Europe;
- Promote legal/circular migration through sport;
- Offer awards to projects and initiatives from civil society which are using sports to promote EU values;
- Use communication tools in order to promote sport as an element of EU identity.⁵

Related to major sport events and advocacy, the HLG recommended the following actions in order to promote the EU values, both within and outside the EU:

Support projects relating to the staging of major sport events, including pre-event, side event and legacy activities;

- Take forward the recommendations of the various expert groups established under the 2nd EU Work Plan for Sport as well as Conclusions adopted by the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council;
- Recognise the potential of sport, and specifically the staging of major sport events, as an important aspect of EU economic diplomacy and influence effort;
- Create a network of sport ambassadors including current as well as former athletes and coaches, to promote EU values through sport.⁶

⁴ The three members are Professor Richard Parrish, Professor Carmen Perez Gonzalez and Professor Thierry Zintz. See European Commission (2016) *High Level Group on Sport Diplomacy: Report to Commissioner Tibor Navracsics*. Accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/sport/library/policy_documents/hlg-sport-diplomacy-final_en.pdf

⁵ European Commission (2016) *High Level Group on Sport Diplomacy*, p. 24.

⁶ Ibid. p. 25

Regarding the development of an organisational culture of sport diplomacy, the HLG recommended that the EU:

- Develop the European dimension in sport by mainstreaming sport into relevant EU policies and funding programmes. Feature the word “*Sport*” in the title of the Directorates-General (DG) Education and Culture. Give sport diplomacy a priority status in the next EU Work Plan for Sport. Refer to the potential of sport diplomacy in the EU Foreign Affairs strategy and the EU Human Rights Action Plan when it is next reviewed;
- Organize a group of experts on sport diplomacy;
- Incorporate sport into the portfolio of Delegation Officers;
- Increase awareness in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of EU Member States.⁷

The report of the HLG gave impetus to EU sport diplomacy and progressively the EU institutions have acted to implement many of the group’s recommendations. The Commission and Council have been most active in this field with, to date, more limited involvement from the European Parliament.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Council activity has centred around taking forward Presidency agendas. For example, in 2016, the Council adopted *Council Conclusions on Sport Diplomacy* which called on the EU to be more proactive in this area.⁸ In 2018, the Council adopted Council Conclusions on ‘*Promoting the Common Values of the EU Through Sport*’.⁹ The Conclusions invited the European Commission to “include sport as part of external relations” and “disseminate successful projects and initiatives among Member States as well as outside the EU as a tool to promote common values of the EU”.¹⁰ Most recently, in May 2021, under the Portuguese Presidency, the Council held a Council policy debate on sport diplomacy and staged a two-day sport diplomacy conference in Lisbon in June.¹¹ The policy debate was structured around a discussion paper entitled “*Sport Diplomacy: Promoting Europe’s Interests and Values in the World*” which recognized the efforts of the European Commission to establish international relations through sport and which recommended “the possible creation of a Sport Diplomacy Platform”.¹² These periodical observations and proposals mentioned in the documents issued by the Council illustrate an emerging vision of the European political actors about the role of sports as a “*diplomatic lubricant*”.¹³ The Council has also been instrumental in establishing sport diplomacy as a priority theme in successive EU Work Plans for Sport, including the current plan running between 2021-2024.¹⁴

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

The Commission has also been active in the area of sport diplomacy. For example, in addition to convening the HLG, the Commission has staged a number of sport diplomacy events, including two

⁷ Ibid. p. 25.

⁸ Council of the European Union (2016), *Council Conclusions on Sport Diplomacy*, 14279/16, Brussels, 23/11/16. Accessed at: <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14279-2016-INIT/en/pdf>

⁹ Council of the European Union (2018), *Promoting the Common Values of the EU Through Sport*, 2018/C196/06. Accessed at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2018:196:FULL&from=FR>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Council of the European Union (2021), *Sport diplomacy: Promoting Europe’s interests and values in the world*, 8128/21. Accessed at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8128-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Cha, V. (2009) *Beyond the Final Score: The Politics of Sport in Asia*, Columbia University Press.

¹⁴ See Council of the European Union (2017), *Work Plan for Sport (1 July 2017 – 31 December 2020)*, 9639/17, Brussels, 24 May 2017. Accessed at: <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9639-2017-INIT/en/pdf> & Council of the European Union (2020), *Work Plan for Sport (1 January 2021 – 30 June 2024)*, 2020/C 419/01, accessed at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1204\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:42020Y1204(01)&from=EN)

high-level conferences in 2016 and 2017.¹⁵ It also published a study on *Sport Diplomacy, Identifying Good Practices*.¹⁶ In 2017 and 2018, the Commission included sport within the framework of cooperation agreements with China and Japan. As a result, at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the EU was represented by some leaders despite COVID-19. The Commission has also promoted dialogue with the sports movement, particularly through Structured Dialogue including debating sport diplomacy in multi-lateral forums such as the EU Sport Forum. Bilateral agreements have also been concluded, such as that between the Commission and the Union for European Football Associations (UEFA), adopting the *Arrangement for Cooperation between the European Commission and the Union of the European Football Associations*.¹⁷

An important contribution made by the Commission concerns taking forward the HLGs recommendations on how to fund sport diplomacy initiatives. In particular, following the HLG report, the EU made some important changes to the Erasmus+ programme to allow greater participation from organisations outside the EU. Similarly, amendments were made to the European Week of Sport so that non-EU countries could participate, meaning the reach of EU sport diplomacy could extend more effectively beyond its borders. The Commission has also pushed for an increase to the Erasmus+ budget so that, amongst other things, the EU can achieve its sport diplomacy ambitions. The Erasmus+ programme's budget for the period 2021-2027 was set at over €26 billion, a significant increase on the €14.7 billion budget for 2014-2020.¹⁸

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

A 2021 study into EU sport policy found that the “*European Parliament has not yet become active in the area of sports diplomacy*”¹⁹, although later that year the Parliament did publish a report into EU sports policy in which it expressed the view that the Parliament should play a more active role in the area of EU sport diplomacy.²⁰ The study highlighted some problems for EU sport policy, and by default, for sport diplomacy. A key issue concerns that lack of integration in sport policy in which national interests compete and multiple European institutions operate thus causing fragmentation in strategic thinking. As for the subsequent Parliamentary report, even though there are very few references to sport diplomacy in it, some issues highlighted could be approached through the lens of sport diplomacy, such as:

- the call for a “*communication on the future of sport linked to the EU's strategic goals*”;
- the plea for “*sports federations and organisations to uphold human rights and democratic principles in all of their actions*”;
- the focus on “*fighting corruption in sport*”;

¹⁵ European Commission (2016), *Seminar on Sport Diplomacy*. Outcomes, 6/12/16. Accessed here: <https://ec.europa.eu/sport/sites/sport/files/seminar-sport-diplomacy.pdf> & European Commission (2017), *Seminar on Sport Diplomacy*, 6/12/2017. Accessed at: <https://ec.europa.eu/sport/sites/sport/files/report-sport-diplomacy-seminar-2017.pdf>

¹⁶ ECORYS (2017), *Sport Diplomacy. Identifying Good Practices, a final report to the European Commission*. Accessed at: <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0efc09a6-025e-11e8-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-65111809>

¹⁷ European Commission (2018), *Annex to the Commission Decision adopting the Arrangement for Cooperation between the European Commission and the Union of the European Football Associations (UEFA)*, C(2018) 876 final, Brussels, 19/2/2018. Accessed at: https://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/EuroExperience/uefaorg/EuropeanUnion/02/53/98/34/2539834_DOWNLOAD.pdf

¹⁸ European Commission (2021), *Erasmus+: Over €28 billion to support mobility and learning for all, across the European Union and beyond*, Press release, 25/03/21. Accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1326

¹⁹ Mittag, J & Naul, R. (2021), *EU sports policy: assessment and possible ways forward*, European Parliament, Research for CULT Committee – Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels. Accessed at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/236742/PE652-251_Study-EU-Sport-Policy.pdf

²⁰ European Parliament (2021), *Report on EU sports policy: assessment and possible ways forward (2021/2058(INI))*. Accessed at: http://isca-web.org/files/Report_on_EU_Sports_Policy-consolidated_version.pdf

- the call for action to counter discrimination and support groups such as refugees and the LGBTQI+ community in sport;
- the recommendation for *“including cross-border mobility of athletes in the next Erasmus+ programme”* and the inclusion of sport staff mobility in the programme;
- the call for *“a strategy for supporting former athletes to ensure they have adequate access to jobs, skilling or reskilling”*;
- the recommendation that *“the Commission establish a network of ambassadors for sport”*;
- the focus on providing support for grassroots sport;
- and the call for workers’ rights to be respected, particularly *“the working conditions of construction workers involved in building sports infrastructure”*.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE STRENGTHS OF THE EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR ON SPORT DIPLOMACY

From the above assessment of EU initiatives in the area of sport diplomacy, it is clear the EU is actively exploring deploying sport diplomacy with its relations with third countries. The next step is for the EU to locate and frame its approach within a wider strategy. As discussed in section 4 below, the EU will need to overcome some key challenges before it is able to adopt and implement an effective sport diplomacy strategy. However, the EU can draw on a number of distinct strengths that highlight why strategic thinking in this area should be pursued.

EUROPE: A SPORTING HERITAGE

Europeans love sport. Despite concerns about declining participation in organised sport, over 40% of the EU population practiced some physical activities at least once a week (2014) and around one-third attended a live sport event (2015).²¹ For broadcasters, sport remains the key driver for attracting viewers and advertisers and with robust levels of household consumption on sport, the sector accounts for 2.12% of total EU GDP and 2.72% of EU employment.²²

Aligned to this, sport is one of Europe's, although perhaps not the EU's, most prominent sources of attraction for external audiences.²³ Europe is widely considered the home of modern sport, with many international sports governing bodies having their origins and current seat in Europe. Sports administrators, sports participants and even politicians often refer to the existence of a 'European model of sport', which *"has been exported to almost all other continents and countries, with the exception of North America"*.²⁴ As is explored below in section 4, the term 'European model of sport' is contested, particularly by those who consider it a self-serving attempt by sport governing bodies to resist change and dampen the influence of stakeholders.²⁵ Nevertheless, however it is defined, European sport has a profound resonance across the globe. For example, fuelled by the presence of globally recognised football stars, the Spanish La Liga derives nearly half its considerable broadcasting revenues from international contracts, many of which are concluded beyond European borders.²⁶

From the above, it is clear that sport is popular in Europe and European sport is popular globally. However, sport holds a special place in the hearts of many across the globe and it is central to shaping the identity and culture of many countries. Europe is not unique in this regard. In the Australian context, as Murray argued, *"[w]hy then, if sport is so prominent in Australian history, culture, and society, has it only recently begun to figure in Australia's diplomacy, which, after all,*

²¹ Eurostat (2020), *Statistics on Sport Participation*. Accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_sport_participation

²² European Commission (2018) *Study on the economic impact of sport through sport satellite accounts*. Accessed at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/865ef44c-5ca1-11e8-ab41-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

²³ PPMI et al (2015), *Analysis of the perception of the EU and EU's policies abroad*, Executive Summary, p.10. Accessed at: https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/cier-data/uploads/2016/11/2016_FPI_Study-External-Perceptions-of-the-EU_Executive-Summary.pdf

²⁴ European Commission (1998), *The European Model of Sport*, Consultation Document of DGX 5.

²⁵ EU Athletes (2021), *EU Athletes Response to the Lobby for a 'European Model of Sport'*, press release, 20/04/21. Accessed at: <https://rm.coe.int/eu-athletes-response-to-the-lobby-for-a-european-sports-model/1680a2430e>

²⁶ Tifosy Capital and Investment (2021), *Broadcasting Breakdown: The European Big 5*. Accessed at: <https://www.tifosy.com/en/insights/broadcasting-breakdown-the-european-big-5-3481>

is about representing a nation's culture and values in the international relations system?"²⁷ The same question can be asked of the EU. And as a consequence, it could speak in favour of a stronger focus on the common constitutional values such as ensuring peace, well-being, democracy and freedom of people and association, more than promotion of one or the other organisational model.²⁸

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: NATIONAL SPORT DIPLOMACY STRATEGIES

Articles 6 and 165 TFEU equip the EU with the ability to support, coordinate or supplement the sports related actions of the Member States. Specifically, it requests that the EU fosters “*co-operation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the field of sport*”. This can be read as legal justification for the development of an EU sport diplomacy strategy. Nevertheless, the Member States and the relevant sports bodies retain the primary competence for sport, and the fourth paragraph of Article 165 rules out EU harmonising measures, meaning that an EU sport diplomacy strategy will not replace those of the Member States. With that safeguard in place, there is space for Member State sport diplomacy strategies to flourish with the emerging EU strategy adding value to the national approaches.

Many EU Member States have developed long standing social, cultural and economic ties with various parts of the globe, with sport diplomacy featuring in a number of public diplomacy actions and strategies. For example, in Europe, France is considered a pioneer of sport diplomacy, boasting the world's first Ambassador for Sport. The French strategy aims to promote French sport internationally, increase French presence in international bodies, and ensure French continues as the official language of the Olympic Games. France is also committed to stage major sporting events to project a positive image of France abroad and as a means of attracting inward investment. Other Member States are also active in the field of sport diplomacy. Reflecting a growing awareness of the value of sport diplomacy, in 2019, the Spanish Secretariat for Global Spain published “*Sports Diplomacy as an actor for Global Spain. The need of a model for Spain*”.²⁹ Likewise, Croatia incorporated sport diplomacy into its national sports strategy (the National Sports programme) and established “*a body in charge of sports diplomacy*” in the Central State Office for Sport, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs.

In other policy areas where the EU possesses a supporting competence, such as cultural policy, EU action can add value to Member States actions through so-called ‘smart complementarity’, whilst respecting the principle of subsidiarity. EU action can help amplify national strategies thereby giving such strategies global reach and impact in international organisations. With sport diplomacy only recently emerging as an area of interest in national capitals, the EU is well placed to share best practice, pool resources and give a greater voice and impact to these developing strategies. Of course, challenges exist. With the development of EU cultural diplomacy, some Member States resisted perceived EU harmonisation with the resulting reluctance to pool resources in culture. This contributed to a form of messaging over cultural diplomacy that became more about building political consensus rather than subject matter itself.³⁰

²⁷ Murray, S (2017), *Sports Diplomacy in the Australian Context: Theory into Strategy*, Politics and Policy 45(5), 846.

²⁸ Recently, in a report on EU sport policy, rapporteur Tomasz Frankowski “reiterates that the EU institutions and the European Parliament in particular have a key role to play in promoting democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights through sport diplomacy and should be more active in this regard”: Committee on Culture and Education, Report on EU sport policy: assessment and possible ways forward, 8 November 2021. Accessed at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0318_EN.pdf

²⁹ Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs (2020), *La Diplomacia Deportiva como actor de la España global* diego calatayud soriano la necesidad de un modelo para España. Accessed at: http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es/SalaDePrensa/Multimedia/Publicaciones/Documents/Area%20publicaciones/Diplomacia%20Deportiva_L.pdf

³⁰ MacDonald E. & Vlaeminck, E. (2020), *A vision of Europe through culture: A critical assessment of cultural policy in the EU's external relations*, in Carta, C. & Higgot, R. Cultural Diplomacy in Europe: Between the Domestic and the International, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.43-44.

THE EU AS A DIPLOMATIC ACTOR

One of the key strengths of the EU as a global actor in the field of sport is its emerging diplomatic persona, supported by a maturing diplomatic institutional architecture that can facilitate the development and implementation of a sport diplomacy strategy. Once characterised by Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mark Eyskens as “*an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm*”, the EU has added to its suite of competences a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), supported by a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, a European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU Delegations and Offices and Delegations across the globe. The role of the EEAS in helping implement an EU sport diplomacy strategy is crucial, although more focus is needed on mainstreaming sport diplomacy within its work. In 2016, armed with this architecture, the EU adopted a global strategy for the EU's foreign and security policy and it is evident that the external dimension of a number of EU policies, including sport, can help implement this strategy by drawing on the international appeal of sport described above.³¹

The EU can also harness the power of sport to exercise influence with third countries through the range of agreements it has entered into. For example, sport can be, and indeed has been, included within the framework of Accession, Association, Co-operation and Neighbourhood agreements. The EU also has existing experience and expertise in its dealings with international organisations active in the field of sport, including the Council of Europe and the UN, and with international sports bodies, as evidenced through a number of bilateral agreements.³² Moreover, and not underplaying the institutional challenges in coordinating EU action in this area, the EU possesses the institutional capacity to implement a sport diplomacy strategy. For example, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture has expertise in the area of sport policy and is becoming more adept at international sport politics, largely through its role in promoting dialogue with the sports movement. Other DGs are also well placed to assist with the delivery of a sport diplomacy strategy including European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR), International Partnerships (IP), Migration and Home Affairs (HOME) and Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), a service department responsible for the financial and operational components of EU foreign policy.

THE AVAILABILITY OF EXISTING BUDGETS

Whenever an organisation seeks to develop new areas of activity, budgetary issues often impede progress. The EU is no different, yet developing a sport diplomacy strategy is relatively low cost and it can make use of existing budgets. Of greatest importance is the EU's Erasmus+ programme which has emerged as the embodiment of EU ‘soft power’.³³ In 2011, for the first time, sport was incorporated into the EU's Erasmus+ programme and since then it has funded many sports projects including some in the area of sport diplomacy.³⁴ The Erasmus+ budget equips the EU,

³¹ All three areas were mentioned in, EEAS (2016), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Accessed at: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf

³² See for example: European Commission (2018), *Annex to the Commission Decision adopting the Arrangement for Cooperation between the European Commission and the Union of the European Football Associations (UEFA)*, C(2018) 876 final, Brussels, 19/2/2018. Accessed at: https://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/EuroExperience/uefaorg/EuropeanUnion/02/53/98/34/2539834_DOWNLOAD.pdf & *Memorandum of Understanding between the Council of Europe and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA)*. Accessed at: https://www.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/uefaorg/General/02/56/17/27/2561727_DOWNLOAD.pdf

³³ Ferreira-Pereira, L & Mourato Pinto (2021), Soft Power in the European Union's Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: The Erasmus Plus Programme, in Ferreira-Pereira, L. & Smith, M. *The European Union's Strategic Partnerships*, pp.69-94. See also Perilli, A (2018), Erasmus Student or EU Ambassador? People-to-People Contact in the European Neighbourhood Policy: The Cases of Georgia, Ukraine, and Tunisia, *International Relations and Diplomacy*, Vol.6, No.11, pp.583-605.

³⁴ See for example Erasmus+ projects: ISCA et al (undated), *Grassroots Sport Diplomacy* (2018-19), accessed at: <https://diplomacy.isca.org/resources/> Edge Hill University et al (2021), *Promoting a Strategic Approach to EU Sport Diplomacy* (2019-21), accessed at: www.ehu.ac.uk/sportdiplomacy and IRIS et al (2022), *Towards an EU Sport Diplomacy* (2021-22), accessed at: <https://www.tes-diplomacy.org>

in partnership with non-governmental actors, the means to deliver sport diplomacy activities. One problem with funding sport diplomacy projects was the Erasmus+ funding criteria that deterred the participation of partners from third countries, the main target of sport diplomacy actions. This administrative blockage was addressed in 2018, but monitoring should take place to establish the extent of third-country participation within the programme. Should third-country participation still be limited, the EU should consider amending the Erasmus+ eligibility criteria so that certain target 'partner' countries become fully-fledged 'programme' countries with no participation obstacles. Changes were also made to the European Week of Sport programme to extend participation to Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership states and in 2019, a call for proposals on exchanges and mobility in sport presented a tool for international co-operation initiatives with the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and with countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa. In addition to Erasmus+, sport diplomacy can draw on other existing EU external relations funding mechanisms.

EXISTING STRENGTHS IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY

Although relatively underdeveloped, the EU possesses diplomatic experience in fields closely connected to sport, notably in cultural and education. These two areas sit alongside sport as a supporting competence of the Union. This means that along with sport, cultural and educational policy, are retained as Member State competences. This has not, however, impeded the development of an external and diplomatic dimension to these two areas of EU activity, an observation strengthening the view that so called 'third-tier' competences can assist with the implementation of wider EU goals, notably those connected to its external relations policies.

The development of EU cultural diplomacy offers a pathway to the development of an EU sport diplomacy strategy. A cultural diplomacy strategy has been mooted for a number of years.

³⁵ A major step occurred in 2016 with the adoption of both the EU's Global Strategy and the joint communication, Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations.³⁶ The joint communication identified the potential of culture to "*overcome divisions, strengthen fragile societies, and improve international relations*" and in doing so it highlighted the cross-cutting potential of other EU competences such as sport and education in the implementation of wider EU competences. Council Conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations were adopted in 2017 which provided guidance on how the EU should approach a cultural diplomacy strategy³⁷ and in 2019, the Council adopted conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action.³⁸ This framework for action was expected to promote a bottom-up focus on people-to-people contacts, but instead focussed largely on partnerships with national cultural institutes.³⁹ The EU should learn from this experience and ensure a bottom-up,

'people-to-people' focus is placed to the fore of the sport diplomacy strategy. To support the EU's

³⁵ See for example, European Commission (2007), *A European agenda for culture in a globalising world*, COM(2007) 242 final, 10/5/2007. Accessed at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0242:FIN:EN:PDF> and European Commission (2014), *Preparatory action: Culture in EU external relations. Engaging the world: towards global cultural citizenship*. Accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/publications/global-cultural-citizenship_en.pdf For academic commentary see: Carta, C. & Higgot, R. (2020), *Cultural Diplomacy in Europe: Between the Domestic and the International*, Palgrave Macmillan.

³⁶ European Commission (2016), *Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations*, Join/2016/029. Accessed at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN%3A2016%3A29%3AFIN>

³⁷ Council of the European Union (2019), *Council Conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action*, 7935/15, 5/4/2017. Accessed at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7935-2017-INIT/en/pdf>

³⁸ Council of the European Union (2019), *Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action*, OJ C 192, 7/6/2019. Accessed at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019XG0607\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019XG0607(01))

³⁹ Abdullah, H & Molho, J, (2020), *Towards a multi-level strategy for EU external cultural relations: Bringing cities on board*, European University Institute, *Global Governance Programme*, Issue 2020/03.

approach to cultural diplomacy, in 2016, a non-governmental Cultural Diplomacy Platform was established, eventually becoming the Cultural Relations Platform in 2020. The Platform is an EU funded project supporting international cultural relations and cooperation between European and global cultural and creative sectors. Amongst other things, the Platform provides policy support for EU institutions, organises events and provides training for cultural professionals.⁴⁰ It can be envisaged that a similar body can be developed to support the EU's work in the field of sport diplomacy.

A second area of EU activity also offers insights into the development of an EU sport diplomacy strategy. Whether cultural diplomacy incorporates education, or whether education diplomacy is its own distinct field is a question that has received only very limited attention.⁴¹ The reality is that the EU practices both, so its development of sport diplomacy can build on this experience. The EU's role in education is long-standing, with the founding Treaty of Rome incorporating 'vocational training' as a competence. Despite a number of education programmes, the key development came in 1987 with the adoption of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, commonly known as Erasmus. This programme, along with the Erasmus Mundus scheme, promoted student exchanges between higher education institutions across Europe and globally. Reformed into Erasmus+ in 2014, the programme is much broader, incorporating a wide range of opportunities in higher education, vocational education and training, school education, adult education, youth and sport. Indeed, the funding for this TES-D project is provided by Erasmus+ Sport. In 2016, the EU's Global Strategy cited education 14 times and scholars are beginning to acknowledge educational diplomacy as an important tool of the EU's soft power.⁴² The projection of this soft power is supported by an Erasmus+ budget of over €26bn, with the sports related component standing at €470 million.⁴³

⁴⁰ <https://crp.fuut.be>

⁴¹ Piros, S. & Koops, J. (2020), Towards a sustainable approach to EU education diplomacy? The case of capacity-building in the eastern Neighbourhood, in Carta, C. & Higgot, R. *Cultural Diplomacy in Europe: Between the Domestic and the International*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.113-138.

⁴² Ferreira-Pereira, L & Mourato Pinto (2021), Soft Power in the European Union's Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: The Erasmus Plus Programme, in in Ferreira-Pereira, L. & Smith, M. *The European Union's Strategic Partnerships*, Palgrave Macmillan., pp.69-94.

⁴³ European Commission (2021), *Erasmus+: Over €28 billion to support mobility and learning for all, across the European Union and beyond*, Press release, 25/03/21. Accessed at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1326

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE EU AS GLOBAL ACTOR IN THE FIELD

Whilst section 2 above highlights the compelling reasons why the EU should develop a sport diplomacy strategy, there are some challenges that must be overcome before it can. The following section discusses these potential challenges that could hinder the effective implementation of an EU sport diplomacy strategy.

RELATIONS WITH SPORTS BODIES

In implementing an EU sport diplomacy strategy, sports bodies will be key partners with the EU. As discussed above, the EU has already forged relations with such bodies, notably through its Structured Dialogue and through bilateral cooperation agreements. However, there is a tension in this relationship. On the one hand, the EU sees sport as a partner assisting with the delivery of key diplomatic messages, yet on the other, the EU often scrutinises sporting rules for compatibility with EU law. Highlighting this tension is the question of the so-called ‘European model of sport’, an issue emerging as a potential key component of EU sport diplomacy.

Some within the sports movement, and indeed some Member States and EU institutions see great value in protecting and promoting the European model of sport, built on the so-called pyramid structure.⁴⁴ For example, in June 2020, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) connected the protection of the European model of sport with EU sport diplomacy. It stated that the European model is “*a values-based model – grounded in the specific nature of sport, based on its fundamental social, educational and cultural values, which help deliver on European sports policy, contributes to regional development, fosters integration, tolerance, well-being and health, contributes to environmental protection, the fight against radicalisation, and social cohesion*”.⁴⁵ To protect the European model, the IOC document called for “*the sports movement and public authorities to join forces*”.

The EU’s response, issued by way of Council Conclusions in November 2021 was more guarded. It stated that, “*although due to the diversity of European sport structures there is no common definition of European Model of Sport, some key features make it recognizable. Such features include pyramidal structure, open system of promotion and relegation, the grassroots approach and solidarity, role in national identity, structures based on voluntary activity and its social and educational function*”.⁴⁶

Language is important. Whereas the IOC document referred to the European model of sport, the Council preferred to reference a European model, indicating political reluctance to entirely endorse the IOC’s view. The Council of Europe (not to be confused with the Council of the European Union or the European Council) also exercised semantic caution. In its revised European Sports

⁴⁴ For discussion see Cattaneo, A. & Parrish, R. (2020), *Sports Law in the European Union*, Wolters Kluwer.

⁴⁵ International Olympic Committee (2020), *The European Model of Sport*, June 2020. Accessed at: <https://rm.coe.int/the-european-sport-model-paper-by-the-ioc/1680a1b876>

⁴⁶ Council of the European Union (2021), *On The Key Features of a European Model of Sport*, 14430/21, 30/11/21. Accessed at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14430-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

Charter, adopted on 13 October 2021, the Council of Europe, highlighted “*the common features of a framework for European sport and its organisation, understood by the sports movement as the European sport model*”.⁴⁷

However, the European Sport Model is a contested concept. For example, EU Athletes, a multi-sport federation, representing more than 25,000 elite athletes from 17 European countries opposes reference to the European sport model. In a press release issued in the Summer of 2021, the organisation announced that it is “*strongly opposed to any attempts to recognise, codify or ‘protect’ the European sport model or its elements as proposed by the Olympic movement*” which it sees as “*little more than a continuation of the long running and unsuccessful campaign for sport to be exempt from European laws*”.⁴⁸ EU Athletes considers the current model excludes athletes from governance choices and this conflicts with EU sports policy and law that requires sports bodies to commit to good governance principles, including stakeholder representation in decision making.⁴⁹ Indeed, this has been subject to litigation, notably with regards the International Skating Union’s (ISU) prohibition on athletes participating in events that it does not authorise, and the challenge by the European Super League Company to UEFA rules frustrating the establishment of such a league.⁵⁰

On the face of it, the question of the protection of the European model of sport offers the nascent EU sport diplomacy an issue on which it could build. However, the lack of consensus on the issue seriously erodes its utility and threatens to undermine the EU relations with key diplomatic partners, notably sports bodies and athletes. The EU should also take care not to be seen to preach the superiority of ‘its model’ to the rest of world with its diplomatic messaging. Previously employed language, such as the boast that the Europe ‘exported’ the model to the rest of world, is likely to be counterproductive.⁵¹ In any case, the input provided by the European Commission’s Study on the European Model(s) of Sport, to be published shortly, will be of interest.

SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE

Sport is not sufficient in itself for diplomacy. It seems more accurate to consider that it creates an opportunity for diplomacy. In this regard, a question immediately arises: an opportunity for what? This is something the EU has to clarify before defining and implementing its own sport diplomacy strategy. Sport is considered a useful tool to address specific problems, but perhaps not just any problem. For this reason, a first challenge will be to identify those in which sport is a differential tool to solve them. Until now, sport diplomacy goals have been defined very broadly at EU level.⁵² Concretizing these objectives into a strategy that addresses specific problems or challenges may be problematic due to the difficulties the EU has had so far in acting as a single actor. While some authors have identified the difficulties in speaking with one voice that the EU has traditionally

⁴⁷ Council of Europe (2021), *Revised European Sports Charter*, CM/Rec(2021)5, 13/10/21, Art.2(2). Accessed at: <https://rm.coe.int/recommendation-cm-rec-2021-5-on-the-revision-of-the-european-sport-cha/1680a43914>

⁴⁸ EU Athletes (2021), *Response to the Lobby for a ‘European sport model’*, 14/6/21. Accessed at: <https://euathletes.org/eu-athletes-response-to-the-lobby-for-a-european-sport-model/>

⁴⁹ This has also been emphasized by the Council of Europe: see PACE Resolution 2199 (2018), *Towards a Framework for Modern Sport Governance*. Accessed at: <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/24443>

⁵⁰ See Case T-93/18, *International Skating Union* (under appeal before the European Court of Justice, C-124/21 P) & Case C-333/21, *European Superleague Company* (pending).

⁵¹ European Commission (1998), *The European Model of Sport*, Consultation Document of DGX 5.

⁵² See for instance the *Council conclusions on sport diplomacy* (supra note 6).

experienced with the ineffectiveness of its foreign policy,⁵³ this need not necessarily be problematic. On the contrary, it is a logical consequence of the weight of state sovereignty in the integration process and the different positions that Member States hold on certain key foreign policy issues. The issue of speaking with one voice is particularly prominent in the area of mega-sporting events. Even if the EU prefers to frame its sport diplomacy in a more nuanced people-to-people style, it cannot avoid some difficult questions. A case in point is the staging of men's 2020 Euro UEFA Football Championship (Euro 2020) which highlights the limits of EU sport diplomacy when faced with national and organisational interests. During the COVID-19 pandemic, eleven cities hosted the games and this gave rise to conflict as competing interest clashed. For example, Pascal Canfin, chair of the European Parliament's environment committee, addressed a letter to Parliament President David Sassoli, asking him to lobby EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel to have a common position against the huge presence of spectators at Wembley for the semi-finals and final.⁵⁴

The Canfin-Sassoli public correspondence rises the issue of internal communication between the EU institutions. Disorganized or uncoordinated internal communication can negatively affect external communication, and hence the development of an EU sport diplomacy strategy which relies on clear messaging. There is not an abundant literature about the internal communication structure of the EU, but its internal functioning could be understood through the internal structure of the organisation. The main EU institutions, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission, work to accomplish the objectives set in the Treaties. They have tripartite meetings or trilogues, which are informal discussions, with the aim to accelerate the bureaucratic procedures. The trialogues are not enough and further communication among various departments interested in sport diplomacy could lead to improvements in this internal communication in order to establish a more pragmatic approach to this topic.

Euro 2020 also highlighted tensions between political leaders within the EU. For example, the match between Germany and Hungary became presented as a 'fight over European values'. After UEFA refused a request from Munich City Council to illuminate the Allianz Arena in the rainbow colours of the LGBTQ+ community, some European leaders condemned UEFA and viewed this as a collaboration with the Hungarian government. In this regard, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán cancelled his trip to Munich to attend the game in response to widespread criticism of his government's position on LGBTQ+ issues.⁵⁵ In the context of Euro 2020, the intentions of Hungary to use the event for its own purposes was anticipated, but it was impossible for the European political leaders and UEFA to agree a common plan regarding the event.⁵⁶

Other difficult issues connected with the staging of mega-sporting events includes how to speak and act in common with regards human rights issues. The award of the 2022 men's Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup to Qatar attracted criticism, particularly once concerns were raised that the human rights of migrant construction workers were not being respected by the Qatari authorities.⁵⁷ In January 2021, the 27 EU sports ministers signed a letter addressed to Commissioner Gabriel requesting a more focussed approach to the issue of respect

⁵³ da Conceição-Heldt, E. & Meunier, S. (2014), Speaking with a single voice: internal cohesiveness and external effectiveness of the EU in global governance. *Journal of European public policy* 21 (7): 961-979.

⁵⁴ Euractiv (2021) *EU politicians demand Wembley to be stripped of Euro 2020 final*, 2/7/21. Accessed at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/eu-politicians-demand-wembley-to-be-stripped-of-euro-2020-final/

⁵⁵ BBC (2021), *Hungary PM 'scraps Euros visit' amid German LGBT row with UEFA*, 23/06/21. Accessed at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57579821>

⁵⁶ Plaza Martin, D. & Alarcon Hernandez, E. S. (2021), The "Greater Hungary" and the EURO 2020. *Sports diplomacy of an illiberal state. Soccer & Society*, 22(4), 2021, p. 327-342.

⁵⁷ The Guardian (2021), *Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded*, 23/02/21. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>

for human rights in the staging of mega-sporting events, both within and outside the EU.⁵⁸ This message was repeated by the European Parliament in its 2021 report, discussed above.⁵⁹ This issue highlights the ability of the EU to speak with a common voice on such issues, but thus far, the EU has not acted in common. The ultimate test, and one that will be resisted by the sports movement, concerns whether the EU institutions and Member States would be willing to take common action in the contentious area of diplomatic and sporting boycotts of major events, such as the 2022 Winter Olympic and Paralympics Games in Beijing.

FRAMING THE MESSAGING

The above discussion on the European model of sport highlights a wider problem for EU sport diplomacy – how to frame the messaging, especially because there is a weak articulation of a modern diplomacy, where many actors from different backgrounds and with different positions can constitute an EU diplomacy, as opposed to a one-sided desire to ‘speak with one voice’.

Connecting the European model of sport to EU sport diplomacy could be viewed as an attempt by the EU to export its perceived superior model. This difficulty also infected EU cultural diplomacy. High Representative Mogherini referred to the EU as a “*cultural superpower*”.⁶⁰ This messaging, if based on the perceived superiority of European culture and values, will mean EU cultural diplomacy is “*destined to fail*”.⁶¹

An equally challenging issue for the EU is the question of whether EU sport diplomacy will be co-opted to promote the idea of European identity. Sport diplomacy is often seeped in symbolism, and there will be inevitable calls for the symbol of the EU, its flag, to be more closely associated with sport and sporting events, as it already is with the Ryder Cup in men's golf. Recently, it was reported that Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas and Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Jansa requested that at the opening ceremony of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, the Slovenian team carry the EU flag, as well as the country's national flag.⁶² The argument was that Slovenia held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. The IOC refused the proposal on the grounds that an Olympic team “*can only use one flag, one emblem and one anthem*”.⁶³

A test for EU sport diplomacy will come in the run up to Paris 2024. A common EU team has been mooted. For example, Kühnhardt presented two models for Paris 2024, the first a “*genuine single, united EU Olympic team*” and the second “*a combined form of traditional national Olympic teams whose members will always carry the EU flag along with their national symbols (dress code, accommodation, presentation in the Opening and Closing ceremonies)*”.⁶⁴ There is a pronounced risk that should EU sport diplomacy take this turn, it will become embroiled in political disagreement at Member State level and come up against public opposition. This risk undermining the people-to-people focussed approach that EU sport diplomacy should be taking.

⁵⁸ <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/documents/1410845/3547387/Letter+to+Commissioner+Gabriel+on+Human+Rights+in+Sport.pdf/c4247b92-2aa6-3ef2-997d-d5abde131c27/Letter+to+Commissioner+Gabriel+on+Human+Rights+in+Sport.pdf?t=1611757153577>

⁵⁹ In reality, the European Parliament has gone further. In its resolution of 16 September 2021 on a new EU-China strategy (2021/2037 (INI)) ‘recommends that the leadership of the EU and the Member States decline invitations to the Beijing Winter Olympics in the event that the human rights situation in China and Hong Kong does not improve and no high-level EU-China Human Rights Summit/ Dialogue with a tangible outcome takes place prior to the event’. Accessed at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0382_EN.html

⁶⁰ Higgott, R. (2020), EU Cultural Diplomacy: A Contextual Analysis of Constraints and Opportunities, in Carta, C. & Higgott, R. *Cultural Diplomacy in Europe: Between the Domestic and the International*, Palgrave Macmillan, p.20.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp.35-36.

⁶² Euronews (2021), Symbols of tolerance: EU pushes for its flag to fly at Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony, 19/07/21. Accessed at: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/07/19/symbol-of-tolerance-eu-pushes-for-its-flag-to-fly-at-tokyo-olympics-opening-ceremony>

⁶³ Politico (2021), Olympic chiefs reject call for EU flag at Tokyo opening ceremony, 22/07/21. Accessed at: https://www.politico.eu/article/ioc-rules-ban-eu-flag-from-olympics-opening-ceremony/?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1626978745

⁶⁴ Ludger Kühnhardt (2021), *The European Union should form one EU Olympic Team for 2024*, 14/05/21. Accessed at: https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/Education/f/36/proposals/10135?locale=fr&order=recent&per_page=100

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF SPORT DIPLOMACY

As said above, this was one of the recommendations made by the High-Level Group on Sport Diplomacy in 2016. It proves to be a crucial challenge. A continuous, coordinated and consistent EU work in this field is very much needed in order to build and implement a credible strategy. Sport diplomacy shouldn't become a topic to be discussed or addressed only at the highest political level. On the contrary, the presence of sport has to be reinforced at all levels. In this regard, sport diplomacy initiatives should be part of the daily work of EU institutions and departments.

It should not be forgotten that this is a multidimensional policy. This means that different EU institutions, departments and agencies must be involved in its design and implementation. As analysed above, this has, by and large, been the case so far. We can therefore speak of an emerging sport diplomacy strategy in which the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament have been involved. Despite this, sport remains an underutilised tool, albeit one with enormous potential. Many of the regulatory and policy instruments offer opportunities to be seized in this regard.

As already discussed above, it is also important that a turf-war culture does not develop within the EU and between the EU institutions and the Member States. This potential problem presents many dimensions. At EU institutional level, the competent DGs need to work together, and with the EEAS, rather than each laying exclusive to the area. Most importantly, an EU sport diplomacy strategy must demonstrate its complementarity with Member State sport diplomacy strategies so that resistance from national capitals does not impede its progress. In order to make supranational and national policies complementary, the EU can take as an example the experiences of other regional International Organisations, as the African Union or ASEAN.

Regional sports projects which are involving countries members of the European Union are indicating a potential of collaboration and an improvement of the internal relations inside the EU. A such case is the agreement signed in 2019 by the governments of Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Serbia to prepare a common candidacy to host FIFA World Cup 2030. This document was signed in April 2019 in Thessaloniki and launched a common project which involves football officials and government officials, who are collaborating and have periodical meetings. A project like this has the role to strengthen the relationship between the EU countries, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, but also prepares the field for a new member of the European Union, Serbia, which is expected to finish its negotiations by the end of 2024, allowing it to join the EU by 2025.

CONCLUSION

The pessimist (realist?) might argue that the EU is “beset by crises of confidence and identity”.⁶⁵ Internally, Brexit both reflected and encouraged nationalist movements, and externally, the EU’s normative power has struggled to receive a hearing in an increasingly turbulent and illiberal world and one fractured by Coronavirus. In this light, one might conclude that the EU’s softest of soft powers (sport) is no match for these forces and that the EU should accept that its sport diplomacy ambitions are doomed to failure. However, this paper argues the opposite is the case, whilst not understating the challenges that lie ahead. Whilst it is true that sport can bring out the worst in people and states, it mostly reflects what is good about European society. If the global liberal order is in a state of crisis, sport can remind people just why liberal democratic society is worth protecting – but sport is by no means a panacea.

⁶⁵ Higgot, R. (2020), EU cultural diplomacy: A contextual analysis of constraints and opportunities, in Carta, C. & Higgot, R. *Cultural Diplomacy in Europe: Between the Domestic and the International*, Palgrave Macmillan, p.35.

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