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THE DIPLOMATIC ROLE OF FOOTBALL IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

ДИПЛОМАТИЧНА РОЛЬ ФУТБОЛУ В СУЧАСНОМУ СУСПІЛЬСТВІ

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This article examines football as a diplomatic instrument in the contemporary world, highlighting its socio-cultural, political, and economic dimensions. It argues that football has transcended the realm of sport to become a powerful tool of “people’s diplomacy,” capable of shaping national images, fostering intercultural dialogue, and serving as a platform for conflict resolution. Historical cases, such as the symbolic role of football during ideological confrontations in Spain and Latin America, as well as global tournaments like the FIFA World Cup and UEFA European Championship, illustrate football’s capacity to influence international relations and collective identities. The analysis also emphasizes the

ambivalent character of football diplomacy, acknowledging its potential to act as both a unifying force and a catalyst for conflict, as demonstrated by the Balkan wars and the phenomenon of “sportswashing” in authoritarian regimes. Special attention is given to the Ukrainian context, where football has played a significant role in international positioning, cultural representation, and political communication during the Russian-Ukrainian war. The study concludes that football, as a multidimensional form of diplomacy, functions not only as an arena of cultural exchange but also as an effective mechanism of soft power and geopolitical influence.

Football in the contemporary world has transcended the boundaries of a purely sporting phenomenon, evolving into a multifunctional socio-cultural and political instrument that exerts a profound influence on the shaping of international relations and global identities. Scholarly research demonstrates that football has become one of the most effective mechanisms of so-called “people’s diplomacy,” capable of fostering a positive image of states, encouraging intercultural dialogue, and providing a platform for conflict resolution [9, 11].

Historical experience provides numerous examples of football being instrumentalized for diplomatic purposes. In the twentieth century, matches frequently served as symbolic arenas of ideological confrontation. The rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona extended well beyond sport, embodying the broader struggle between the centralized Spanish state and the Catalan national movement [8]. A similar pattern was observed in Latin America, where football could act either as a factor of social consolidation or as a trigger for conflict escalation, most vividly illustrated by the so-called “Football War” between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969 [16].

At the same time, international tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup and the UEFA European Championship have gradually transformed into global political events fulfilling three central functions: image-building, economic, and cultural. The 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, which significantly altered the country’s international perception, and the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, symbolizing African renewal and demonstrating the continent’s capacity to host world-class events, exemplify the image-building function [9,10]. The economic dimension of such events is equally important: they create employment opportunities, stimulate tourism, and generate substantial infrastructure investments [5, 15]. Their cultural role lies in creating a shared identity space, where sport unites individuals across nations and religions.

Nevertheless, the ambivalent character of football diplomacy must also be acknowledged. In certain contexts, football has acted as a catalyst for conflict: the Balkan wars of the 1990s demonstrated that matches could

provoke violence and exacerbate interethnic tensions [17]. In the twenty-first century, the phenomenon of “sportswashing” has become increasingly salient, with authoritarian regimes such as Russia, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia exploiting major sporting events to legitimize their political agendas and sanitize their international image [7, 14].

The Ukrainian case is of particular relevance for understanding football as a diplomatic resource. The co-hosting of Euro 2012 provided a powerful impetus for Ukraine’s international positioning, despite criticism over corruption risks and excessive expenditures [2, 4]. The national team’s achievements at the 2006 World Cup contributed to the construction of a positive international image, while the successes of Dynamo Kyiv and Shakhtar Donetsk in European competitions functioned as significant instruments of symbolic diplomacy [1, 3]. During the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, football has become a tool of social mobilization and an effective channel for communicating Ukraine’s stance to the global community. Matches played by the national team at Euro 2020 acquired symbolic meaning, as the players’ performances came to be associated with the struggle for independence and democratic values.

Furthermore, contemporary football constitutes a crucial element of the global economy. The transfer market generates billions of dollars annually, while broadcasting rights have emerged as one of the primary sources of revenue for the industry [13]. Beyond economics, football operates as a powerful channel of “soft power.” China, through investments in football infrastructure and the recruitment of leading European players and coaches, seeks to reinforce its image as a global power [12]. Conversely, the exclusion of Russia from international competitions after 2022 demonstrated that football can serve not only as a medium for dialogue but also as a mechanism of collective sanctioning [6].

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that football as a diplomatic instrument is inherently multidimensional. On the one hand, it facilitates intercultural dialogue, advances national interests, and strengthens international cooperation. On the other hand, it can act as a source of conflict, a tool of manipulation, and a means of legitimizing authoritarian regimes. For Ukraine, sports diplomacy has acquired particular salience in the context of war, as football functions not only as a vehicle of cultural representation but also as an essential instrument for articulating the country’s political position to the global community.

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