



Chapter 11

PLAYING WITH DICTATORS IN A GAME OF WAR AND PEACE

“The case is that for us it is easier in dictatorships. Dictators can organise events such as this without asking the people’s permission.”

Few international sports leaders have exposed the soft spot that international sports leaders have for autocratic rulers as clearly as the late Gian-Franco Kasper, a Swiss member of the IOC and president of the International Ski Federation (FIS), did in the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* in February 2019.

Although Kasper had to apologise for his remarks a few days later, they echoed a political reality that others have expressed only a little more subtly.

In 2013, FIFA’s then secretary general Jérôme Valcke said that “less democracy is sometimes better for organising a World Cup” because, he said, “when you have a very strong head of state who can decide, as maybe Putin can do in 2018, that is easier for us organisers than a country such as Germany where you have to negotiate at different levels.”

Democracy was never in the DNA of the IOC, which was founded in 1894 by members of the European aristocracy and upper-class bourgeoisie. But almost all international

Serdar Berdimuhamedow (right, in brown trousers) serves both as president and supreme sports leader of Turkmenistan, one example of the lack of sports autonomy that the IOC turns a blind eye to.

Photo: Merdan Velhanov/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

sports federations are – at least in theory – operating in a democratic structure that unites the little local club with the international federation.

Nevertheless, history is loaded – as shown in a previous chapter – with alliances between sport and autocrats, from the infamous Nazi Olympics in 1936 to the de facto selection of Saudi Arabia as host for the future FIFA World Cup in 2034. The events may vary in their cultural, financial, and political setting, but they all show that sport refrains from taking democratic values seriously.

Playing with autocrats is a risky game for a movement that wishes to be seen as a beacon of peace between nations.

This became obvious when the Russian Federation invaded their neighbouring country Ukraine on 24 February 2022, only two days after the closure of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing.

The invasion happened during the so-called ‘Olympic Truce’. Claiming to repeat a practice from the Olympics in ancient Greece, this truce calls for countries to let the arms rest from the seventh day before the opening to the seventh day following the closing of each Olympic Games. The UN General Assembly regularly backs this initiative that was relaunched by the IOC in 1991 “with a view to protecting, as far as possible, the interests of the athletes and sport in general, and to harness the power of sport to promote peace, dialogue and reconciliation more broadly.”

But it is wrong to seek legitimacy for a truce in the Olympic Games, professor of sports history Hans Bonde argued in the Danish daily Politiken in 2023: “In antiquity, there was no general peace associated with the Olympic Games. There are plenty of examples of war between city-states and even war between states competing in the Olympic Games. The concept of pacifism simply did not exist in antiquity. A warrior mentality prevailed.”

Third violation of the truce

Obviously, that mentality still thrives. It was for instance by no means the first time Russia ignored the noble intentions of the truce. In 2008, Russian troops started a war with Georgia during the Beijing Summer Olympics. In 2014, as the lights over the closing ceremony of Russia’s own Winter Olympics in Sochi faded, Russian-backed troops invaded the peninsula of Crimea which belongs to Ukraine.



Queen Sofia from Spain signs the Olympic Truce wall in Athens in 2004. This IOC initiative is adopted by the UN General Assembly before every Olympic Games, but rarely respected. Photo: Milos Bicanski/Getty Images

None of these previous invasions had triggered any response whatsoever from the guardians of Olympic peace, the IOC.

But the global outrage over Russia's third military aggression during the Olympic truce was so loud that the IOC had to respond. Most notably, Eastern European countries and their national Olympic committees, who had for years argued that Russia should not be punished too harshly for its systemic doping policies, realised that their national existence was put at risk.

The day after the invasion, the IOC recommended not to hold any international sports events in Russia and the country of its war ally Belarus.

A few days later, the IOC recommended excluding all Russian and Belarusian athletes from international competitions “in order to protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants”.

In a more symbolic action, the IOC stripped three prominent Russians of their Olympic Order in Gold, namely the president Vladimir Putin, the head of the Sochi Games and deputy prime minister Dmitry Chernyshenko, and Dmitry Kozak, deputy chief of staff of Putin’s office.

However, the IOC did not disallow Russian sports leaders to continue their roles in the international sports federations, nor did it touch its own Russian IOC members, arguing that they were representing the IOC in Russia, not Russia in the IOC.

The IOC qualified the situation as “a dilemma that could not be solved”.

Sport as an enabler?

But could the world of sport have done more to avoid this dilemma? Had sport served to enable the growing nationalism and militarism in Russia over the two decades that Putin had ruled?

After placing major international sports events in Russia and Russian leaders inside many international sports organisations, the Olympic family business was accused of having fuelled the former KGB officer Putin’s dream of rebuilding the power of the former Soviet Union by military force.

Russia invested billions of dollars in hosting the 2014 Olympic Winter Games, the 2018 FIFA World Cup, and other major sports events in the hope of gaining soft power at home and abroad.

International sport had welcomed the money and the opportunities with open arms. Russian oligarchs with close ties to Putin had bought influence and powerful positions in numerous sports federations. Doping and corruption went hand in hand in some sports, and the international anti-doping movement had been in disarray because of the IOC’s relatively soft approach towards the Russian–international doping scandal.

According to the German investigative journalist Jens Weinreich, who has followed Olympic politics for 30 years, the sanctions of Russia were too little, too late.

“Olympic sport lags miles behind the actions of politicians,” the German wrote in a Play the Game commentary a week into the war in Ukraine, arguing that in addition to banning Russian athletes, the IOC should have suspended the Olympic committees of Russia and Belarus, who supported the Russian invasion, and FIFA and UEFA should have suspended the national football associations of the two countries.

“This Olympic system with the IOC on top has not only allowed itself to be taken over by Russia and Vladimir Putin. [They] wanted exactly that: Putin’s approval, the money of the Kremlin, the state corporations, and oligarchs,” Jens Weinreich stated.



Only one person has access to the Soviet and Russian espionage files with intelligence from the Olympic movement, says German journalist Jens Weinreich – that person is Vladimir Putin who here opens the Sochi 2014 Olympics. Photo: David Goldman/Pool/Getty Images

In this respect, the German journalist argued, international sports organisations were on the side of the Russian perpetrators.

“They have ignored all the warnings from whistle-blowers and the many media revelations of huge corruption, criminality, and doping over several decades. The entanglement of the so-called Olympic family with the Kremlin mafia in the past decades should be dealt with by independent international investigators, paid and supported by the European Union, and an international court.”

Jens Weinreich grew up in the German Democratic Republic during the Cold War when the Soviet Union dominated Eastern Europe. To him, the real dilemma for the Olympic family was how Vladimir Putin would react to the sports sanctions. Because, as the German journalist said, the well-documented Soviet and Russian Olympic spying activities by the KGB, FSB, and the military intelligence agency GRU span over a period of half a century.

Based on indictments of GRU officers in the US, the Russian hacking of anti-doping institutions such as WADA, but also CAS, the IOC, FIFA, and World Athletics as well as three dozen other organisations, and Russian cyber-attacks on the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, the 2018 Games in Pyeongchang, and the servers of the Olympic organisers of the 2020 Tokyo Games, Jens Weinreich concluded:

“There is only one person who has access to all the results of this Olympic espionage. There is only one person who, over the past two decades, has been at the hub of Russian sports politics, only one person who has snapped his fingers and set dozens of oligarchs in motion, who in turn have done everything they can to buy votes, to buy major events, Olympic Games, federations, and officials. That person is Vladimir Putin. The fear in the Olympic family is enormous.”

Putin in defense of Pierre de Coubertin

Whether the fear is justified remains to be seen. The Russians have announced that they will stage the World Friendship Games in 2024 as an alternative to the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics, hoping to attract some world-class athletes from their geopolitical allies.

Russia took a similar initiative shortly after the invasion of Ukraine and the ban on their athletes. At a substitute event for the Beijing Paralympic Winter Games 2022 in the Sibe-

rian city of Khanty-Mansiysk, Vladimir Putin said at the opening that “it was an apex of cynicism” to ban Russia and Belarus from the Beijing Games.

“The damage was inflicted not only on innocent athletes but on our Paralympians, who are the ones to never break down, overcoming all of the most difficult obstacles in their lives to win global support and admiration.”

Hinting at the sanctions against Russia for systemic doping in the past decade, Putin presented himself as the true protector of Olympic values:

“In recent years, a lot of major international competitions have been marked by events that are incompatible with sports, its spirit and atmosphere. [...] We have seen how the ideas of Pierre de Coubertin are methodically falsified and distorted, and the once-sacred principles of sports become blurred.”

“Right before our eyes, equality turned into perverted tolerance, justice became double standards, and the fight for clean sport became a politically biased dictatorship of the anti-doping bureaucracy.”

And the leader of a nation, who more than any other has used sport to a political end, accused the IOC of violating the Olympic Charter, “including the key thesis that the Games are a competition between athletes, not between states.”

“What we are witnessing now is equality taking the shape of a perverted tolerance, and justice assuming double standards, while the fight for clean sports turns into a politically orchestrated dictatorship in the sphere of the anti-doping bureaucracy.”

Perhaps the Olympic ban on Russia for its war against Ukraine shouldn’t come as a big surprise to the Russian president. Although many nations go to war without being banned from sport, war has often been an IOC argument for banning a country.

In 1920, Austria, Bulgaria, Turkey, Hungary, and Germany were banned from the Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium, due to their involvement in the First World War. The ban on Germany was upheld at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. Germany and Japan were also banned from the 1948 Olympic Games in London because of their involvement in the Second World War.

Other IOC sanctions of nations include South Africa being banned from all Olympic Games between 1964 and 1992 because of UN condemnation of its apartheid system. Rhodesia was banned from the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich for the same reason.

In 2000, Afghanistan was banned from the Olympic Games in Sydney due to the Taliban regime’s discrimination against women, and the national Olympic committee of

Kuwait has twice been suspended by the IOC because of government interference. Ironically, the suspension was inspired the Kuwaiti sheikh Al-Sabah in a political move against his own country.

Athlete protests in Belarus

Russia's war ally, Belarus, was for long another example of the global sports family doing Olympic business with dictatorships.

In the summer of 2019, Belarusian president Aleksander Lukashenko was accused of major human rights violations when the capital Minsk was hosting the second European Games, one month prior to the president's 25th anniversary as head of state in the former Soviet republic. For 23 of the 25 years, Lukashenko had also served as the head of the National Olympic Committee.

The European Olympic Committees (EOC) had granted this event to Belarus as a last option because no other country wanted it. In the former Soviet Red Army officer Lukashenko, the then EOC president Patrick Hickey seemed to find a soulmate, and he singlehandedly bestowed an Olympic award on him in 2008 – causing furore among more democratically inclined EOC members.

Lukashenko was and is infamous for ordering state authorities to repress political opponents, civil society activists, lawyers, rights groups, and journalists.

One year after the European Games in Minsk, thousands of Belarusians, including many athletes, were arrested after riot police cracked down on peaceful mass demonstrations against Aleksander Lukashenko's August 2020 re-election for a sixth term as president – an election which was widely regarded as fraudulent.

In the first year of the public protests in Belarus, thousands of activists including athletes were sent to prison, and the crackdowns inspired elite athletes to create the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation.

125 sports people applied to the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation for help in cases of discrimination and dismissals for political reasons. 98 of them had been arrested, eight were political prisoners, and 36 professional athletes and coaches were dismissed from national teams.

IOC exclusion of Belarus

After months of pressure from Belarusian athletes, the IOC decided in December 2020 to exclude all members of the Executive Board of the Belarusian Olympic Committee, including Aleksander Lukashenko, his son Victor Lukashenko, and the national ice hockey president Dmitry Baskov, a strong supporter of the regime who had been involved in a violent street incident that led to the death of the Belarusian citizen Roman Bondarenko.



Maryia Zhurava and Mikhail Zaleuski (bottom left) presented the work of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation and brought home the Play the Game Award 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

In a clear act of defiance, the Belarusian Olympic Committee elected Victor Lukashenko as its new president in February 2021 and re-elected Dmitry Baskov as an Executive Board member. The IOC did not recognise the new board of the national Olympic committee in Belarus and expressed ‘great disappointment’ but didn’t exclude the Belarusian Olympic Committee from the Olympic family.

The Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation received the Play the Game Award 2022 together with the former Afghan football player Khalida Popal for having “put their lives at risk by opposing violent, inhuman, autocratic regimes to protect fellow athletes”.

Mikhail Zaleuski, a former general director of the Belarusian football club Bate Borisov who now lives in exile in Poland, received the award on behalf of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation and told Play the Game:

“When we use the word ‘solidarity’, it is not about revenue. It’s about the basic, fundamental values of sport. It’s difficult not to be in solidarity with people who are being repressed, detained, and tortured. It’s about humanity and that the image of athletes should not only include high performance but also the moral values of sport such as equality and unity. That is why we hope our fight will be followed up internationally. Together we could reform the world of sport.”

The outdated relic of autonomy of sport

The Belarusian call for reform in world sport echoes what thousands of athletes, sports leaders, politicians, media people and NGOs have demanded for more than a decade.

However, reform from the outside is unlikely as long as a united Olympic movement continues to lean on the concept of the autonomy of sport.

This concept is rooted in the 19th century when modern sport started as an activity marked by voluntarism, association life, and civic engagement. It was sport’s way of upholding association freedom, a well-established human right.

However, in the global billion-dollar entertainment industry that sport has become today, the concept of autonomy of sport has often served as a shield to protect corrupt practices without interference from society.

At the opening of Play the Game 2015, the then longest serving IOC member Richard W. Pound called the autonomy of sport “an outdated relic from an earlier era”, and asked:

“Why should a corrupt organisation be afforded deference by society? Why should a corrupt organisation be rewarded? [...] There is an easy answer – it should not.”

The IOC president Thomas Bach has also emphasised that sports organisations must abide by the law. However, many countries do not yet have sufficient laws to sanction corruption in private organisations, and sports organisations are often the first to protest and threaten to suspend the countries that wish to tighten their legislation in that area.

Such threats and suspensions have been issued against Nigeria, Kenya, India, Trinidad and Tobago, and also Italy, Montenegro, Greece, and Poland, among others.

It is surprising that the IOC and the most powerful federations only defend the autonomy of sport in countries where sports organisations actually do enjoy association freedom.

Olympic sport is never heard complaining over authoritarian regimes where the state and the sports apparatus can hardly be separated, like China, Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and the monarchies in the Middle East.

To help the IOC identify violations of autonomy, Play the Game made a ‘sports autonomy index’ in 2017 which showed that 14 per cent of the 205 recognised national Olympic committees (one in seven) were directly controlled by people with positions in government.

“Knowing the strict rules of the IOC and its frequent flagging of autonomy as an almost sacred principle, it is surprising that the IOC can allow no less than 29 NOCs to be directly controlled by government officials,” said Play the Game’s international director Jens Sejer Andersen in a comment to the survey.

With money from authoritarian states securing the revenues from the outside, and small countries receiving benefits for votes on the inside, there is little prospect of real, democratic reform in world sport presently.

In contrast, power may be further concentrated at the top hierarchy of sport thanks to a new source of incredible fortunes flowing in from the Middle East.

UAE as first movers in the Middle East

The United Arab Emirates was one of the first countries in the Middle East to invest in sport. Since hosting its first powerboat race in Dubai in 1987, the state-owned airline company Emirates has been a sponsor of various teams and events across sports such as

sailing, tennis, football, motorsports, horse racing, golf, cycling, cricket, and Australian football.

Over the years, Emirates' sponsorships have included prominent football clubs in Western democracies such as Real Madrid, AC Milan, Arsenal FC, Olympique Lyonnais, Hamburger SV, Olympiacos FC, and S.L. Benfica, as well as the Asian Football Confederation and the English FA Cup. But the sponsorships weren't really questioned until 2008, when Sheikh Mansour al-Nahyan, a member of the family that rules the richest of the united emirates, Abu Dhabi, bought the English Premier League club Manchester City.

In 2013, 94 suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested in Abu Dhabi and allegedly tortured while in jail. 69 of them were sentenced to prison with no right to appeal for plotting to overthrow the government of the United Arab Emirates.

According to Human Rights Watch, the case showed that the ownership of Manchester City was used by Abu Dhabi to “construct a public relations image of a progressive, dynamic Gulf state, which deflects attention from what is really going on in the country.”

Five years later, the German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, based on information obtained from Football Leaks, accused Manchester City of having spent much of the past decade trying to get around European football's financial fair play rules with inflated sponsorship deals and hidden contracts using companies and trusts operating in tax havens. And in 2022, at Play the Game's conference held in Odense, Denmark, the English journalist Nick Harris provided evidence of how Manchester City managed to get around UEFA's Financial Fair Play rules.

“In 2014, after City's first punishment, an employee at Etihad, via an intermediary, alleged to me that Etihad's sponsorship department was only paying 8 million GBP a year of the 35 million+ money, and the rest was being paid in disguised – and banned – funding via other entities



Etihad vs. Emirates? UAE vs. UAE? The sponsors of the English Premier League Clubs Arsenal and Manchester City are both rooted in the United Arab Emirates.

Photo: Stuart McFarlane/Arsenal/Getty Images

controlled by Sheikh Mansour,” Nick Harris said.

“Later, I got documents that apparently showed it was true, and lots of more documents and correspondence published by Der Spiegel backed this up.”

But the accusations of human rights violations and alleged breaches of financial fair play rules have not prevented the Middle East autocracies from continuing to pour money into sport, and the Olympic family embracing their generosity.

The crown prince’s vision

In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched its Vision 2030, a strategic plan to reduce the Kingdom’s economic dependence on oil by creating a more diversified economy and a vibrant society by promoting a healthy lifestyle. One of the goals was the creation of professional sports and a sports industry in the oil-rich country that represents the largest economy in the Middle East.

Since then, Saudi Arabia has hosted several international events across sports such as chess, tennis, golf, racing, and horseracing.

But it was only when the Saudis made remarkable advances into international football that Saudi Arabia’s sports strategy made the global headlines.

It caused worldwide attention when the English Premier League in 2021 approved the sale of Newcastle United to a business consortium led by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund chaired by the de facto Saudi ruler, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.



The owner of Manchester City, Sheikh Mansour from Abu Dhabi, at the UEFA Champions League final 2023. The sheikh has only attended a couple of matches since his acquisition of the club in 2008. However, his access to immense riches has seemingly enabled the club to circumvent UEFA’s financial fair play rules. Photo: Michael Regan/Getty Images



It was not all human rights protests when the Saudi Public Investment Fund took over the English Premier League club Newcastle United in 2021 – here, some of the fans celebrate the announcement.

Photo: Michael Driver/MI News/NurPhoto/Getty Images

In 2023, the Middle East powerhouse spent 907 million US dollars on buying some of the world's best football players, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar, to play for state-owned clubs in the domestic Saudi Pro League.

On 1 November 2023, Play the Game released research that maps the inner circle behind Saudi Arabia's sports endeavour and unveils more than 300 Saudi sponsorships in sport worldwide. The strategy has the objective to not only establish Saudi Arabia as the Middle Eastern sports hub but also to become a major player on the global sports and geopolitical stage.

The dark sides of Saudi Arabia's new soft power strategy have been highlighted in many human rights reports.

“Allowing Newcastle United to be sold to a business consortium led by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, an institution chaired by a state leader linked to human rights abuses, has exposed the farcical inadequacies of the Premier League's Owner's and Director's Test,” Yasmine Ahman, a UK advocacy director at Human Rights Watch, said in March 2022 when a consortium led by a Saudi media group expressed interest in also purchasing Chelsea Football Club.

“As another consortium with Saudi government links eyes acquiring Chelsea, the Premier League should move fast to protect the league and its clubs from being a fast-track option for dictators and kleptocrats to whitewash their reputations.”

In 2017, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman took control over Saudi Arabia's security forces which according to Human Rights Watch have been responsible for numerous human rights violations such as mass arrests, property confiscation without due process, torture, and unlawful attacks on civilians in Yemen.

Furthermore, a CIA report released in 2021 assessed that the crown prince personally approved the 2018 murder operation at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, where agents killed one of his strongest critics, the prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who had fled his home country one year earlier.

New human rights strategies

Sport's alliance with autocrats has not gone completely unnoticed by democratic forces.

Under pressure from a growing number of human rights critics in Western democracies, both the IOC and FIFA have adopted new human rights policies. FIFA's Human Rights Policy, adopted in 2017, outlines its responsibilities to identify and address adverse human rights impacts on its operations, including taking adequate measures to prevent and mitigate human rights abuses. The policy states that FIFA will constructively engage with relevant authorities and other stakeholders and make every effort to uphold its international human rights responsibilities.

Furthermore, in the introduction to FIFA's key principles of its reformed bidding process, FIFA president Gianni Infantino writes that whoever ends up hosting the FIFA World Cup must formally commit to conducting their activities based on sustainable

event management principles and to respect international human rights and labour standards according to the UN's guiding principles.

But in early October 2023, FIFA undermined not only its own governance reform but also its human rights guidelines. Without any open discussion, FIFA's Council gave Morocco, Portugal, and Spain the rights to host the 2030 World Cup and as a consequence would accept bids from candidates in Asia and Oceania for 2034.



A commitment to international human rights standards was first introduced in the Olympic Charter at the IOC session in Mumbai in 2023 – with the notable precondition that rights are to be respected “within the remit of the Olympic Movement”. Photo: IOC Media

With a surprise demand that nations interested in hosting the 2034 World Cup would have only 25 days to prepare a bid that usually takes years to prepare, FIFA effectively played the hosting rights into the hands of the Saudis who seemed all prepared. Within hours of FIFA's message, Saudi Arabia declared it was bidding to host the FIFA World Cup 2034, and the only serious contender, Australia, renounced after a few weeks.

Fifa's manoeuvring allowed Saudi Arabia to capitalise on backroom deals, wrote investigative journalist Sam Kunti on Forbes in a comment piece that was later censored after objections from FIFA and then published in the Norwegian magazine *Josimar*.

"Contrary to claims of good governance, there was no debate, no democracy, and no transparency in the entire process," wrote Kunti, who was seconded by Minky Worden, director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch:

"The possibility that FIFA could award Saudi Arabia the 2034 World Cup despite its appalling human rights record and closed door to any monitoring exposes FIFA's commitments to human rights as a sham."

While FIFA put its human rights promises to rest, the IOC formalised some of its promises.

At its 141st session held in Mumbai, India, in October 2023, the IOC approved human rights amendments to the Olympic Charter. The approval of the amendments came after the IOC members received the first report from the IOC Advisory Committee on Human Rights which was set up in December 2022 as an outcome of the IOC Strategic Framework on Human Rights, which was approved on 9 September 2022.

The new human rights amendments to the Olympic Charter state that Olympism has respect "for internationally recognised human rights" and universal fundamental ethical principles "within the remit of the Olympic Movement".

The amendments also state that "the practice of sport is a human right" and that every individual must have "access to the practice" of sport, without discrimination of any kind "in respect of internationally recognised human rights within the remit of the Olympic Movement".

To which extent these new rules will be tested is hard to say. At the time of the decision, the IOC had appointed only Western-style democracies for the upcoming Olympic Games: France, the US and Australia for the summer editions until 2032, and Italy for the winter edition in 2026.

But challenges may come. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have previously shown interest in hosting the Olympic Summer Games, and Saudi Arabia might make the unlikely

hosting of the Winter Olympics seem more realistic when they host the Asian Winter Games in 2029.

Banning women from sport

However, an actual testing ground for the IOC's human rights commitment has developed not too far from the Middle East. In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime has banned sport for women and girls since it came back to power in 2021. A policy that for decades has been a violation of the Olympic Charter, and now is even more so.

After more than two years of gender equality negotiations with the Taliban, IOC director James Macleod explained at the IOC session in Mumbai that it was “a very complex



Girls attend Wushu training in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2022. The Taliban rulers have banned women from most sports since they came back to power in 2021. Photo: Bilal Guler/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

situation” but that there had also been “a tiny bit of progress” in the ongoing IOC negotiations with the Taliban, which made female Afghan athletes who fled the country ask why the IOC was negotiating with terrorists.

James Macleod referred to the recent Asian Games held in Hangzhou, China, where the Afghan delegation consisted of 83 athletes, including 15 female athletes and both male and female flag bearers.

For Friba Rezayee, one of the first female Olympic athletes from Afghanistan, the IOC’s troubles with the Islamic regime in Kabul were not complicated at all:

“It’s very simple. Ban the Taliban-run Afghanistan for violating the Olympic Charter like the IOC did in the 1990s. There is precedent. And it’s the same Taliban,” the Afghan Olympic judoka who lives in exile in Canada said to Play the Game.



The IOC should ban Afghanistan from Olympic sport as they did when Taliban was in power in the 1990s, says Friba Rezayee, one of the first female Olympians from Afghanistan. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

“What is the mystery behind the negotiations between the IOC and the Taliban? Why are the Taliban not banned from the Olympic movement for violating Afghan sportswomen’s human rights? Why are the IOC negotiating with a group of terrorists?”

To her, the Taliban is nothing but a militant group of Islamic men who have taken her home country and all Afghan women hostage.

“It makes me sad because there is no future for female athletes in Afghanistan. Sports-women will gradually be erased from the Afghan society. The female athletes who grew up in Afghanistan during the past two decades where they were allowed to follow their sporting dreams are now aging and losing interest in sport because of the Taliban.”

Since the Taliban retook control over Afghanistan, Friba Rezayee has written several letters to the IOC urging the committee to ban all Taliban-controlled sports in Afghanistan from the Olympic Movement.

In her latest letter to IOC president Thomas Bach dated October 16, 2023, she and another female Olympic athlete from Afghanistan, Tahmina Kohistani, call on the IOC to respect the rules of the Olympic Charter which says that the IOC is obliged to “encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures, with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women”.

For Human Rights Watch, there was still a tiny hope, according to Minky Worden:

“The Taliban understands a lot of things about sports. They understand there is money for the national Olympic committee. They understand the prestige. The Taliban loves to attend talks in Qatar. There are a lot of things that the Taliban want from the international community and that sport can help deliver for them.”

Democracies withdraw from events

The international prestige linked to sports events that may be attractive to the Taliban and definitely is so to other autocratic regimes comes at a high financial cost.

That explains why democratic governments that must face voters and taxpayers over the size of the sports budget lag behind in the bidding processes – with the future series of Olympic Games as an exception.

At Play the Game 2017, Wladimir Andreff, a professor emeritus in economy at the University of Sorbonne-Paris, said fewer cities were bidding to host the biggest sports events because they were realising that the benefits are overstated and that massive cost overruns

are unavoidable. He pointed out that Paris and Los Angeles were the only candidates for the 2024 and 2028 Summer Olympics after Budapest, Hamburg, and Rome pulled out.

The Olympic Winter Games also experienced this trend.

In October 2014, a few days before a decisive vote in the Norwegian parliament about Oslo's bid for the Winter Olympics 2022, Norway's largest newspaper Verdens Gang released a document in which the IOC described how its members should be treated in explicit details down to flowers in the hotel rooms and smiles from receptionists. More controversially, the IOC demanded cocktails with the king of Norway, separate airport entrances and road lanes, free Olympic sponsor products such as Samsung phones and Coca-Cola, extra late opening hours at hotel bars, and meeting rooms kept at exactly 20 degrees Celsius.

“Norway is a rich country, but we don't want to spend money wrongly, like satisfying the crazy demands from IOC apparatchiks. These insane demands that they should be treated like the king of Saudi Arabia just don't fly with the Norwegian public,” said Frithjof Jacobsen, chief political commentator at Verdens Gang.

The public scepticism caused the conservative party, a member of the ruling government coalition, to abandon Oslo's bid to host the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, and the parliamentary majority for the bid was gone.

Thus, Oslo joined a group of five other planned bids for the 2022 Winter Games. Following public referendums, financial trouble, and political turmoil in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland, and Ukraine, the cities of Munich, St. Moritz-Davos, Stockholm, Krakow, and Lviv all said no to the IOC, reducing the number of candidates to two: Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Beijing, China – with the latter as the winner in 2015.

Indicating that the Olympic family was forced to act on the democratic protests, the Norwegian IOC member Gerhard Heiberg said:

“I have not seen anything like this before. This is urgent. We need to sit down and discuss what is going on. We are at a crossroads here. We have an image problem. People in Norway say: We love the Games – but we hate the IOC.”

Russians in Paris

When this book goes to print, it seems unlikely that the IOC will overcome its image problems in the Western public anytime soon, even if Paris – a symbol of Western cul-

tural splendour – is set to host the 2024 Summer Olympics. The French hosts have gone to great lengths to make the Games more sustainable and less extravagant, but like most other predecessors, the organising committee is investigated by the police for what may be corrupt practices.

The question that attracts the most attention worldwide, however, is once again the relationship between the IOC and an authoritarian regime.

In March 2023, one year after recommending a ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes, the IOC softened its position – with convenient timing, just as the qualifying competitions for Paris 2024 were starting.



IOC president Thomas Bach and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy are at odds after the IOC has opened the door for Russian participation at the Paris 2024 Olympics. Photo: Yevhen Kotenko/Ukrinform/Future Publishing/Getty Images

Team sports were still excluded, and so were athletes and support personnel who actively supported the war or were contracted by military or national security agencies in Russia and Belarus. Other individual athletes “with a Russian or Belarusian passport must compete only as Individual Neutral Athletes”.

Once again, the autonomy of sport and human rights became the focus of the debate, but this time with the IOC trying to use these concepts in their favour.

The IOC maintained that a complete ban of athletes from the two countries would be discriminatory and mobilised support from a United Nations rapporteur who wrote that “anyone has the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of their passport.”

Apparently contradicting itself, the IOC stressed that participation in the Olympic Games is not a human right and the Olympic Charter gives the IOC full authority to invite or not invite persons to the Games without giving any reason.

There were, however, experts who believed that the human rights of Russians and Belarusians must be interpreted in light of the human rights of the invaded Ukrainians whose homes and sports facilities were destroyed in great numbers.

“If Ukrainian athletes are at risk of being directly or indirectly confronted with the war in international sporting competitions, this can have a negative impact on their right to mental health, the protection of their dignity, as well as on their own right to undisturbed participation in cultural life and their right to work”, wrote Patricia Wiater, chair for Public Law, Public International Law and Human Rights at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and advisor to the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB) on the German Verfassungsblog.

With regard to the IOC’s commitment to peace, Wiater acknowledged the challenge, but concluded differently:

“In September 2022, the president of the Russian NOC, Stanislav Pozdnyakov, was quoted saying that it would be an honour for every Russian athlete if he or she could contribute to the success of the war. [...] According to this statement, Russian athletes support the war. Conversely, excluding Russian athletes serves the purpose of having a de-escalating effect on the conflict. For Posdnyakov, the athlete is an abstract instrument for war propaganda – regardless of whether he or she openly displays support for the war. It must be assumed that the abuse of international sporting events for war propaganda cannot be effectively prevented by Russian athletes competing under a neutral flag since the actual act of instrumentalisation refers solely to the human capital ‘athlete’.”

Using athletes as propaganda tools

With this statement, Wiater added to the widespread scepticism that athletes appearing as ‘neutrals’ would be used by the Russian and Belarusian propaganda machines. Over three consecutive Olympic Games, in Pyeongchang 2018, Tokyo 2021, and Beijing 2022, Russian athletes have been forced to appear as neutrals as part of a sanction in the Russian-international doping scandal – but with very little effect.

Preventing Vladimir Putin and Aleksander Lukashenko from using the athletes for propaganda has been the main motive for a broad alliance of Western countries to continue to put pressure on the IOC.

Most lately, the alliance repeated their call for a ban at a meeting for sports ministers in UNESCO in Baku in June 2023, where 41 countries stated that:

“Russia should not be allowed to use sport to legitimise its illegal and unprovoked war on Ukraine, and Belarus should not be able to use sport to justify its complicity in the war led by Russia against Ukraine.”

The response from the IOC was held in an unusually sharp tone. IOC president Thomas Bach called the position of the democratic alliance “deplorable” and an expression of “double standards” – a language mirrored on the IOC’s website:

“It is deplorable to see that some governments do not want to respect the majority within the Olympic Movement or the autonomy of sport which they are requesting from other countries and are praising in countless speeches and UN and European Union resolutions.”

“It is deplorable that these governments do not address the question of double standards with which we were confronted in the consultation calls.”

“We have not seen a single comment from them about their attitude towards the participation of athletes whose countries are involved in the other 70 wars, armed conflicts and crises in the world.”

Values at stake

The last argument was to be undermined by the IOC itself in October 2023, when war again broke out in the Middle East. Israel’s invasion of Gaza could not be compared with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, an IOC spokesman said, because the latter “is a unique situation and cannot be compared to any other war or conflict in the world.”

Although criticised for being lenient towards Russia and Belarus, the IOC should not expect gratitude from those that may draw advantage from the Olympic recommendations. Especially not after the IOC finally suspended the Russian Olympic Committee in October 2023 when the Russian NOC decided to include the regional sports organisations in the occupied territories of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia which are under the authority of Ukraine's national Olympic committee.

Commenting on the IOC's exclusion of the Russian Olympic Committee, the Russian minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, shamed the IOC for not doing the same to Israel after its invasion of Gaza.

"Once again we see an example of the bias and ineptitude of the International Olympic Committee, which time and again proves its political bent," Lavrov said on Telegram.

"[The IOC] actively supports everything that meets the interests of Western countries, primarily the United States, and tries to find wordings that generally prop up this policy."

When the UN General Assembly in late 2023 voted to adopt the Olympic Truce ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympics, Russia abstained from voting while Belarus voted yes expressing "hope that common sense will soon prevail" in Olympic circles.

The IOC recognised on its website in October 2023 that it cannot reconcile the positions, but seemed to find some comfort in its uneasy situation:

"The fact that both sides in this confrontation are not satisfied might indicate that the IOC has found some middle ground on which all sides can move forward to make a contribution to understanding and peace."

"The IOC navigates such an intractable situation through its values, which are its compass. This is why the IOC's athlete-centred recommendations address its core values of peace, unity, solidarity, and non-discrimination."

This conclusion leads to a fundamental question for the international sports movement.

Peace, unity, solidarity and non-discrimination.

Are these core values best guarded by democracy or dictatorship?



An appeal from a sports sphere under destruction

Every two years, sports ministers and high-ranking public officials from the 46 member states of the Council of Europe gather to discuss current issues in sports politics. Stakeholders in sport such as Play the Game are also invited. At the Conference of Ministers responsible for sport held in October 2022 in Antalya, Turkey, Play the Game heard the appeal by the minister for Youth and Sports of Ukraine, Vadym Guttsait, and asked for a copy.

At the time, the recommendation from the IOC was still to keep Russian and Belarusian athletes out of international sports competitions, but Guttsait – who is also head of his country’s NOC – demanded further bans:

Dear Ministers, dear colleagues,
On behalf of the Ukrainian sports movement let me thank you for the support provided for Ukraine in these hard times.

We assembled here to react to modern challenges and opportunities in sports: gender equality, inclusivity, and other important topics.

But today all Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian sports community are focused on other issues, vitally important for our survival.

At the very same moment, when I speak, Russian missiles continue shelling my homeland. Russian soldiers continue killing my compatriots.

Under such circumstances, I cannot be silent and must draw your attention to the current situation in Ukraine.

Every day of the war, the sphere of physical culture and sports in Ukraine suffers new losses.

After the start of full-scale Russian military aggression against Ukraine in violation of the Olympic Truce, our sports community has already lost 154 athletes and trainers.

The Russian army with the help of its Belarusian ally has destroyed 22 and damaged 113 sports facilities in all regions of Ukraine.

Despite this, Ukrainian athletes continue to represent our country in international sports arenas and win the highest awards in fair competitions.

Dear friends,
In these dark times, you gave a hand to Ukrainian sports.

You helped our athletes to train, and Ukrainian NADO to retain the national anti-doping program. Ukrainian people will never forget this support!

Still, I truly believe that more can and should be done to resist Russian military aggression, save Ukrainian lives and restore justice. Thus, further sanctions should be imposed:

- to suspend Russian and Belarusian sport national governing bodies from international sport federations
- to remove all individuals aligned to the Russian and Belarusian states from positions of influence in international sports federations, such as boards and organising committees
- to prevent the broadcast of sports competitions in Russia and Belarus
- to prohibit the participation of representatives of the aggressor countries in any status.

Ukrainians strongly believe that it is inappropriate to have representatives of Russia and Belarus along with the representatives of the civilised world at all levels in sports – both in competitive arenas and in the decision-making process within the sports organisations.

We understand that next year will be a qualifying year for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Therefore, the Russian and Belarusian athletes and their leaders are doing everything possible to return to international sport at least under a neutral flag.

At the same time, the president of the Russian Olympic Committee, violating the Olympic Charter, praises the unprovoked war against my country and states that Russian athletes, including members of the national teams, should be honoured to fight in this war.

It is unacceptable to us! We should not tolerate hypocritical Russian ‘neutrality’ while their bombs and missiles explode in the peaceful streets of Ukrainian cities!

I count on your support and solidarity with Ukraine.

By joining our forces, we become stronger in defending the Olympic values and sustainable peace for Ukraine and Europe.



In October 2022, the Ukrainian sports minister called upon his colleagues in the Council of Europe to increase sanctions against Russia and for instance stop broadcasting of international sport to Russia. Photo: Play the Game

Mapping the Saudi sports power players

Research carried out by Play the Game in 2023 mapped the inner circle behind Saudi Arabia's ambitions in sport and unveiled more than 300 Saudi sponsorships in sport. The research identified 795 positions in 156 Saudi entities and exposed significant conflicts of interest involving influential Saudi statesmen, and not least a troubling relationship between the sporting and political spheres in Saudi Arabia.

In an intriguing fusion of power, politics, and sport, a select group of individuals was identified as being at the forefront of Saudi Arabia's ambitious venture into the global sports arena including a prince, a princess, a globetrotting Harvard-educated businessman, and a minister deeply involved in the military industry.

Together they formed the influential inner circle behind the Kingdom's sports initiatives and investments, all under the watchful eye of Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince and prime minister of Saudi Arabia.

Three of the most influential members of the group in 2023 are:

- **Yasir Al-Rumayyan**, a Saudi businessman and Harvard Business School graduate, who has emerged as a central figure in this intricate landscape. Al-Rumayyan is considered to be amongst the most influential people globally due to his roles as governor of PIF, one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, and chairman of Aramco, the world's biggest oil com-

pany, owned by the state. PIF is not only the driving force behind 'Vision 2030' but also the primary financier of the regime's many sporting investments.

A closer look into Al-Rumayyan's extensive involvement in golf reveals a complex web of conflicts of interest. He presides over both the Saudi Arabian Golf Federation and the Arab Golf Federation and he is chairman of the board of Golf Saudi. He is also a board member of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee.

All these different entities where Al Rumayyan plays a key role also act as sponsors or partners of the same two events: The Aramco Team Series, a five-events series held in five different countries all over the world, and the Aramco Saudi Ladies International held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Both events have prize funds of 5 million US dollars and are sanctioned tournaments on the Ladies European Tour.

The question that looms is the extent to which these affiliations and positions may influence or interconnect with one another. Which interests are Al-Rumayyan in fact serving?

- His **Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Saud** pulls the strings in the Saudi Ministry of Sport. The former Saudi racing driver, businessman, and member of the House of Saud was appointed as minister of sport in 2020, but his influence does not



As a governor of the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) with 800 billion US dollars at hand for sports investments, Yasir Al-Rumayyan is considered among the most influential figures in global sport. Here with former US president Donald Trump at a golf tournament in New Jersey paid for with Saudi money. Photo: Rich Graessle/Icon Sportswire/Getty Images

end there. He is also president of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, which firmly anchors him at the epicentre of Saudi Arabia's multifaceted sporting pursuits.

This type of formal relationship between a leader of a National Olympic Committee and a national government raises critical questions about conflicts of interest, questions of allegiance, and the so-called autonomy of sport that the Olympic movement claims to promote.

Will Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Saud be willing and able to effectively uphold the autonomy of the NOC as a minister and government representative if a situation arises, where the interests of the government and the interests of the Olympic movement diverge politically?

- Another Saudi government official working in the corridors of international sport is **Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud**, a member of the House of Saud. She is the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, where she took office on 23 February 2019, becoming the first female ambassador in the country's history.

Beyond the role as ambassador, Princess Reema also serves as a board member of the Saudi Olympic & Paralympic Committee and the Saudi Sports for All Federation, the main body responsible for developing community sports in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, she contributes to the ambitious national sports academy, Mahd Sports Academy.

But it is her top position as a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that opens doors for Saudi Arabia in world sport. At the IOC, she operates in three commissions: Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (2022-), Sustainability and Legacy (2022-), and Coordination for the Games of the XXXV Olympiad Brisbane 2032 (2021-).

Princess Reema's roles give her the opportunity to serve the diplomatic, political and sporting interests of the state of Saudi Arabia, all at the same time.

A comprehensive strategy

Saudi Arabia has poured vast riches into the sports world for years and captured most of the world's attention in 2023 after a significant influx of some of the highest-paid football players into the domestic Saudi Pro League (SPL) sent shockwaves through the sporting world.

Cristiano Ronaldo set the stage with his move from Manchester United to Al-Nassr in January 2023. In the summer transfer window that same year, Ronaldo was joined by many other football players, including Karim Benzema, the French winner of the 2022 Ballon d'Or, and the Brazilian star Neymar.

These high-profile transfers were made possible by Mohammed bin Salman's launch of the so-called 'Sports Clubs Investments and Privatisation Project'. Under this initiative, Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), took ownership of four SPL clubs – Al-Ahli, Al-Ittihad, Al-Hilal, and Al-Nassr, and through that manoeuvre, the clubs got

financial backing from a sovereign wealth fund with assets of nearly 800 billion US dollars.

This is just one facet of a comprehensive sports strategy initiated in tandem with 'Vision 2030', the Kingdom's national development plan launched by Mohammed bin Salman in 2016.

'Vision 2030' represents a comprehensive reform process of the Kingdom's economic, political, and social structures. Since then, Saudi Arabia has played host

to numerous international sporting events and poured substantial resources into the sports sector. Their objective is not only to establish themselves as the Middle Eastern sports hub but also to become a major player on the global sports and geopolitical stage.

Read more about the Saudi power players in sport and get access to the database at www.playthegame.org



Both the Saudi sports minister, his Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Saud (left), and the IOC member, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud (right), exemplify how state and sport are intertwined in the new sports business superpower. Photos: Brad Barket/Getty Images and Mustafa Ciftci/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images