

The European Union's assets in sport diplomacy

Albrecht Sonntag, Lisbon, 3 June 2021,
keynote speech for the conference "Can sport diplomacy contribute to
building a stronger Europe in the world?"



Good afternoon to everybody, present in Lisbon or listening online. It is a great honour for me to have been invited to contribute an opening keynote to what is definitely the most complete high-level event on the topic of European sport diplomacy so far.

And the line-up is truly impressive, both in terms of thematic scope of the sessions and accumulated knowledge of the speakers. I am no doubt not the only one of the participants who wishes to address sincere thanks to our Portuguese hosts for having given this still emerging topic the prominence it deserves.

I would also like to congratulate them on the timing of their conference.

It's an excellent moment to take stock of sport diplomacy's potential within the European Union's portfolio of foreign policy tools. Three reasons for that:

1.

First, the need for a more distinct European foreign policy has never been as keenly felt as today, at a moment when a new geopolitical configuration is emerging.

This new global environment is characterised by an intensification of both aggressive economic competition and unprecedented interdependence.

It produces a highly unstable mix of actors that are caught in open systemic rivalry and, simultaneously, condemned to engage in collaboration.

It has led to a growing awareness – and I would say, desirability, for the EU's role as diplomatic actor in its own right.

2.

Second, diplomacy itself seems to be evolving rapidly, putting into question some axioms and concepts that have prevailed unchallenged for ages in international relations.

Diplomacy, for centuries the preserve of inter-state relations, has become a messy marketplace of a large number of non-state actors.

The conceptual framework keeps evolving, too. Over the last twenty or thirty years, we have learnt to use new terms like "soft power" or "public diplomacy", but one may wonder if in the new configuration even these recent concepts are still as meaningful as they used to be when they were introduced into the debate.

Against this backdrop, sport diplomacy is no longer an exotic secondary theatre, but one of many different arenas, where actorness and influence are negotiated.

3.

My third point is that the European Union, contrary to conventional thinking and regular media coverage, is far from being a diplomatic dwarf. Quite the contrary: in the new diplomatic arena, the EU, precisely because it's a latecomer, a still unidentified political object, neither a state nor a fully integrated federation, has actually a series of assets with regard to the traditional nation-states it is itself made up of, and with which it coexists on the world stage. In other words: it has

real diplomatic potential, in any case more than it used to have at any point in its still young existence. And almost counter-intuitively, sport is one area in which it could put this potential to good use.

These three points I just made turn the title of the conference – “Can sport diplomacy contribute to build a stronger Europe in the world?” – almost into a rhetorical question.

My short answer could therefore be a resounding “Yes. Of course it can!” before passing the floor to the first panel. But since the organisers have kindly granted me fifteen minutes for this introductory keynote, I’m happy to develop my thoughts a bit more.

In the autumn of 1995, the German government ran a series of TV ads, which showed various toddlers in their clumsy, often awkward efforts to master their environment. So cute! Each of the clips had the same bottom line: “you can’t expect a five-year old to be perfect.”

This rather funny communication campaign was of course referring to German reunification, which had occurred just five years before. The subliminal message was: please bear patience with the new Germany, it is still very young, it faces challenges, but it will learn quickly.

It’s a similar situation for European sport diplomacy: many of us who have gathered for this conference are convinced of its potential and impatient to see our high expectations realised, but we should, in our discussions, never lose out of sight that this is still a very young idea.

In general, speeches and texts about European sport diplomacy, be they academic or policy-oriented, have a tendency to start with an effort of self-justification. As if there was a need to demonstrate that sport should be on the dashboard of diplomats, and that diplomacy should be on the radar of sportspeople and sports researchers.

While this is understandable, I wonder if it’s still necessary.

Sport has reached a level of global reach, permanent visibility, and socio-cultural appreciation in the daily life of developed, but also developing societies that is virtually unprecedented. And its role in the shaping of international perception patterns is undeniable.

In a newspaper column some years ago, I wrote that the European football championship is “the poor man’s Erasmus” – an access to experiencing otherness, to international relations in the fundamental meaning of the term.

Sport, as has been pointed out repeatedly by the promoters of sport diplomacy, allows to garner spontaneous sympathy, dispel negative stereotypes while consolidating positive ones, impress with collective performance (be it as diligent organisers and joyful hosts of events, triumphant winners and graceful losers), and most of all, it allows to “connect”, perhaps the key word of our age. Sport connects across borders – which is what diplomacy is about in the first place, isn’t it?

In other words: sport diplomacy is not only a potential tool for state actors who wish and claim to have a global influence, it is no longer an optional tool, but it has become an indispensable one. Being perceived as unsensitive or indifferent to sport comes at a reputational cost.

This assumption is also one of the underlying reasons why the High-Level Group, set up only six years ago by Commissioner Navracsics with the aim to put sport on the external relations agenda of the European Union, was very much in favour of a proactive positioning of the European Union in the field of sport diplomacy. We considered there was room for diplomatic action that would be complementary to both interests and ongoing actions of the member-states.

Needless to say, we have been more than pleased and honoured to find that quite a few of the recommendations we submitted made their way into important declarations and concrete actions. Let me just recall some of them briefly:

- The Council Conclusions of November 2016 – which represent an essential recognition by the (then still) 28 of sport's potential for the EU's external relations,
- the EU Work Plan for Sport 2017-2020,
- the Good Practices Report of 2018,
- the increased access for candidate countries to events like the European Week of Sports or, even more importantly, the ERASMUS+ programme, and the strengthening of sport within this programme's overall budget – all these are steps into the right direction.

Of course, there are also some recommendations that have not been implemented yet:

- the idea of a network of European sport ambassadors that we floated, for instance, a team of athletes willing and capable to flag their European citizenship and represent European values;
- or the wish to see sport taken out of its niche and mainstreamed into the mind frame and activities of other EU services that are relevant for external relations.
- The need for an organisational culture of sport diplomacy will no doubt be addressed in the forthcoming round table, too.

But undoubtedly, and most importantly, there has been the emergence of a kind of consensus, recalled by Commissioner Gabriel only two weeks ago at the Council of ministers meeting on the topic. I quote: *“Sport is a powerful instrument for the promotion of our interests and common values in the world.”*

And there is reason to believe that the promotion of common European values will play an increasingly important role in the forthcoming decade, in a global environment where fundamental concepts like “human rights”, “civil society”, “inclusion” or even “democracy” itself are openly and explicitly put into question by rivalling powers.

In promoting its values through sport, I believe that the European Union possesses, as mentioned previously, a series of natural assets or advantages.

To start with, it has no vocation to serve as organiser or host of sport mega-events. That should come as a relief, since mega-events, one of the traditional, most visible and most researched vectors of sport diplomacy, are a costly and risky business.

Neither is the EU a competitor in such events. It does not have teams or individual athletes competing in its name and is therefore under no pressure to channel resources with an eye on medal tables of all sorts.

Moreover, when it comes to the necessary “credibility capital” in spreading home-grown values, the EU has the immense competitive advantage of not being a nation-state, carrying the burden of a long and often very ambivalent past.

By consequence, while it's certainly the object of criticism, most often from inside, it is not the target of serious negative prejudice around the world.

In other words: there is a profound coherence between the values of sport and the ones the EU wishes to foster and embody.

And it has some natural allies and partners in this endeavour. The Council of Europe, UNESCO, even and especially post-Brexit, the Commonwealth – these are multilateral institutions that share

precisely the same fundamental values. For the time being these potentially enriching partnerships are underused and result only in punctual collaborations. There is room for improvement, and there is room for optimism that these alliances will form more naturally in the near future.

I would like to conclude in sharing with you a thought-provoking new theory very recently formulated by the renowned French international relations scholar Bertrand Badie in a book named “inter-socialities”. According to this theory, rather than “inter-national” – meaning: between nation-states – global relations are becoming more and more “inter-social” – between societies.

For Bertrand Badie, the world of the 21st century is, I quote, “*no longer simplistically geopolitical*”, but increasingly dominated by, I quote again, “*subtle dynamics that make identity issues, social movements, emotions and exaltations audible and weaken the old principles of territoriality and sovereignty*”.

I found this inspiring in the context of our conference topic. The “inter-sociality” of sport fully fits into this vision where a traditional, so-called “Westphalian” worldview of competing nation-states is bypassed and often outmanoeuvred by borderless movements that are normative in character are driven by values and emotions.

That’s good news for European sport diplomacy. Sport is by definition loaded with emotions and rooted in values, and it’s a highly normative social practice. As a result, it is in all evidence a tool of what may be called normative power, best wielded by a credible, multilateral actor, capable of delegating the promotion of values to a lively, dynamic, and self-confident civil society, enabling and building a virtuous circle of constructive people-to-people dialogue.

Two weeks ago, Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, after reviewing the progress that had already been achieved in a relatively short lapse of time, also admitted that, I quote again: “*we must recognise we are still lacking a real strategy.*”

That’s true, and perhaps this exciting conference may contribute to identifying the pillars of such a strategy. The one that I would suggest, as you have noticed, is the empowerment of European civil society in the service of European values and the creation of human bonds between Europe and the world.

Thank you for your attention.

I am happy to pass the floor to our host again and look forward to listening to my friend Richard Parrish and his excellent panel. I will join them after their discussion in case there are any questions on my modest contribution.