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LIFE Project

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**“The value of sports diplomacy: example of Lithuanian basketball team decision in
1990”**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the current research is to investigate and understand the value of sports diplomacy through the historical event of Lithuanian basketball team decision in 1990s. To our best knowledge, the relationship between sports and national identity in post-Soviet period has not been studied in depth. To pursue with we apply the post-colonial theory to provide better insight of Lithuanian cultural identity in resistance to the Soviet political regime.

Traditionally, sport was considered to improve international relationships. Several researchers and public officials have emphasised the role of sport in international relations as a form and source of “soft power” (Nye, 2004). The power of sport was also mentioned in the speech by Nelson Mandela in 2000 at the first Laureus World Sports Award: “Sport has the power to change the world, to inspire and to unite people in a way that very little else does”.

The relationships between sport and politics are bilateral. On one hand, politics has a huge impact on sport by making and implementing the sports strategy (Malakootian, 2009). On the other hand, sports being a “soft power” has a huge influence on politics by strengthening human values, national unity and increasing political participation (Malakootian, 2009). It turned out that Lithuanian basketball players decision to object to play with Soviets in 1990s became an important phenomenon for further research given the influence of sport in the international relations and politics in general.

The topic became increasingly important to understand what strategies have been used to strengthen the “soft power”, why and how sports became a tool to manipulate the dominance of big powers regretting at the same time cultural and human values given an example of Lithuanian case in 1990.

This research is structured as follows. First, we provide historical background of sports culture, diplomacy and politics widely, and in Lithuania, particularly. Second, we apply post-colonial theory qualified as with fragmented centralized power to understand how Lithuanian basketball team decision determined the national identity. Subsequently, our research questions are:

1. How sport has been misused by political regime(s), and
2. Why the Lithuanian basketball team was unshakably resistant to play with Soviets.

To answer these research questions we use a single case study methodology as introduced by Yin, 2017. Our research is mainly performed on a basis of systematic literature review (e.g., relevant academic literature, reports and policy documents). The information was collected and analysed through generic databases in English (Science Direct, PUBMED, SCOPUS, Web of Science, ESTER) as well as specific databases for guidelines and standards. The selection of the results was based on the following criteria: (i) relevance to the objective of the research, (ii) relevant and recently published academic literature, and (iii) origin. Given the scope of the current research we intentionally excluded the topics regarding sports medicine or sports informatics.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SPORTS

Historically, the roots of sports can be referred to ancient Games at Olympia. Sport was concerned with the aesthetic area of social life and was distinct from work and political unification. Given the territorial influence of ancient Greece, the term „Pan-hellenic“ („All Greek“) games refers to a strong Greek or Hellenic“ consciousness substantiated in the cultural identity of nations living in the Balkans, Aegean islands including the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, Sicily and southern Italy along the Mediterranean coast, in Cyrene in Northern Africa, in north-east of the Black Sea as well as Egypt, Syria and Babylonia (Scambler, 2005). Thus, the meaning of Olympic Games as for being international has changed in the modern world with its growing impact on diplomacy and politics.

Richard Mandell, in his book, „Sport: A Cultural History“ (1984) has demonstrated the meaning and value of sport before High Culture, before Greeks, but also how sports were perceived in the Greece, in Pre-Industrial High Culture, Europe between 500-1750, England that has been considered as a Land of Sport, America in the 1920s and in the recent times, in the modern Olympic Games and between 1936-1980s as well as in the late XXth century. In most cultures, activities such as foot races, wrestling, boxing, tests of strength, contests in accuracy with projectiles, chariot racing and long jumps as well as demonstrations of dexterity with a ball are generally called as sport (Mandell, 1984;).

Apparently, the meaning and value of sports have changed in times. Sports cannot anymore be perceived as a cultural aspect only. It has developed as a science in social, health and political studies, but also showed capacity to influence governmental decision-making both at

local and international levels (Beacom, 2000). With regard to sport and diplomacy, and sport and politics, one may not dispense with the fact that sport has developed as a result of the human being nature to be combative at one hand, and the ability to cooperate in a well-organised and trained group, on the other.

2.1. Sports Diplomacy and Sport and Politics

Sports diplomacy and sport and politics have evolved over the centuries. Sports is viewed by most observers and enthusiasts as a tool that is intertwined with world politics, which bothers on a thin line between any country or nation's prestige and pride. Sports generally has become the center stage of activity that has influenced many minorities or their representatives to take part in different sporting events, notably the Olympics and the FIFA World Football Championships and other specialty sporting areas (Parvez, 2022). One notable occurrence in history is that sports has influenced ideas such as democracy, freedom and exercising of talents. Sports have been also considered as the re-birth of a nation.

The re-birth of any nation or a country is often seen as a golden opportunity to challenge their existence. In fact, the nationalism of oppressed nations is an effective form of resistance to tyranny and autocracy. Nevertheless, these newly born ideas demonstrate that resistant nationalist ideologies ultimately mirror the evils of their own oppressors and eventually lead to further violence and oppression.

Trunkos and Heere (2017, p 2) suggested that sports serve as an effective platform for foreign diplomacy to facilitate the achievement of strategic objectives such as:

- providing an unofficial reason and location for international leaders to meet and begin a dialogue;
- providing insights into the host country and educating others about it;
- bridging cultural and linguistic differences among nations and seeking common ground through sports;
- creating a platform for new trade agreements or legislation;
- creating awareness for the international relationship through sport ambassadors;
- creating a legacy for the host country, improving its image in the world; and
- using sport to provide legitimacy for a new nation.

Nevertheless, politicians are not only well informed how to use sports to improve their relationships with neighbour countries and/or countries having military powers, but they

often manipulate it for the sake of their own best interests. As such sports have been misused by several political regimes (e.g., the organisation of Summer Olympics in Seoul, Barcelona and Brazil as well as Winter Olympics in Sochi), but also by non-governmental organisations, sport federations, development agencies and multinational corporations (Levermore, 2008). Also, in the last years with the raise of Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., the case with Novak Djokovic vs Australia) and Russian-Ukrainian war especially, the non-equal treatment of sport professionals became obvious in spoiling the international relationships globally.

Given that sports play an enormous role in our daily lives and as seen also in international politics and relationships, the topic became increasingly important to understand what strategies have been used to strengthen the “soft power”, why and how sports became a tool to manipulate the dominance of big powers regretting at the same time cultural and human values.

In the following paragraphs, we introduce how sports have influenced the Lithuanian national identity.

3. SPORTS IN SOVIET AND LITHUANIAN HISTORY

The defeat of the United States by the Soviet Union in 1988 Olympics in Seoul changed the story of basketball since it rekindled engagements in sports diplomacy, provoked thoughts on inalienable rights on citizens and challenged the quest for nationhood. The event was a signpost that subtly introduced men/players who would champion diplomacy, raised the yardstick for measuring love and pride for country in the face of onslaught, deprivation and lack.

Sports in Lithuanian national history plays a major role too. Basketball, however, is one of the most widely known sport games in Lithuanian national history that reflected the power of a small nation since 1939. After representing the United States in the 1936 Olympics, Pranas Lubinas (Frank Lubin), a basketball player born from Lithuanian immigrants, returned to his parents' country to give basketball lessons and is currently known as the „godfather of Lithuanian basketball“.

The country had to endure Soviet rule for about half a century. By 1990, the Lithuanian national basketball team exhibited cultural importance owing to restrictions a good number of them had experienced during the long years of Soviet rule. They symbolized a generational

team that sought to raise awareness about its native orientations, value systems and ethics. The aforementioned influence of American coaching was still prevalent during the Soviet reign in Lithuania. Young players and basketball in Lithuania still developed greatly until a point in the mid 1980s, when the Lithuanian teams, especially Kaunas Žalgiris, the national pride of Lithuanian basketball, had developed to a point where they were up to par, if not better, than Moscow CSKA, the club representing the Red Army.

The matches between CSKA and Žalgiris, attracted great public attention and even led to public anti-Soviet demonstrations. These matches and eventual victories are considered as major points in the process of Lithuania regaining its independence by giving Lithuanian people a platform to realize that the great Soviet Union was defeatable, even if only metaphorically.

As noted by Michael Brearley, a British cricketer and psychoanalyst, the value of sports is to allow human beings to acknowledge and recognise their potentials and infinity: „We begin to know what we are doing and what we are about.“ (Navaratnem, xxxx).

As events approached, Lithuania identified its path to demonstrate themselves to the world through the special design of tie-dyed T-shirts in red, yellow and green (Lithuania's national colors) resonated as a powerful force that decimated a dark political force in history.

In the following pages, we will analyze this prism of introspection with a well-known theory in international relations, known as the post-colonial theory.

3.1. Lithuanian re-independence of 11th March 1990

This section is aimed to give a brief overview on notable issues that led to Lithuania's utmost rejection of renouncing its independence as directed by the Soviet Union.

Since 1939 the relationship between the Baltic peoples and the Soviet government has remained and constantly grew toxic. This is due to the fact, that Soviet Union seized the Baltic nations of Lithuania, and other surrounding ethnic groups and ultimately exiled a good number of the inhabitants of these areas to Siberia. The independence was declared on March 11th 1990 following the policies of „glasnost“ and „perestroika“ of Mikhail Gorbachev, which involved loosening political repression in the Soviet state and improving relations with the West. Furthermore, the abandonment of the Brezhnev doctrine of 1968 justified the right of the Soviet Union to utilize force in preserving already existing communist governments (Zverko, 2022).

Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to declare its independence. The response from Moscow was harsh to the Lithuanian people as well as to their actions. The Soviet state issued an ultimatum – renouncing independence or facing the consequences. The Lithuanians responded on March 17th by ultimately rejecting the Soviet demand. They also requested “democratic nations” grant them diplomatic recognition.

These culminated in tragic events that ensued between Soviet forces and Lithuanians, who unfortunately had suffered economic blockade by the Soviet state, and its cities were surrounded by soldiers. It was a country without diplomatic ties to the West, risking everything including losing the lives of its citizens in the hands of the Soviets. In saving the situation, amidst the terror that had ensued, the U.S. Congress acted quickly to end economic assistance to the Soviet Union.

This action was not pleasant for Gorbachev as such actions grossly waned his power. By December 1991, about 11 of the Soviet Socialist Republics had proclaimed their independence and established the Commonwealth of Independent States. A few days after these actions by the newly established Commonwealth, Gorbachev resigned as president and what was left of the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Additionally, several governments like Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and East Germany fell. The breakup of the USSR formed new post-soviet or also called as post-colonial countries. The communist governments of the east European countries disappeared and many different ethnic groups inside the USSR formed their own countries based on culture, history and language. Also, East Germans stormed the Berlin Wall after realizing that the Soviet Union would no longer protect the wall (Beck, 2016).

With the break of USSR, a huge lesson was learnt – suppression of facts, truths, and the art of being transparent is not an automatic process. It must be grown over time to make such a process rely on institutions rather than on individuals. Such a transparent process must evolve not be in the hands of one or a few persons whose words are the law in any given society. What the Soviet has taught all, is to evolve government systems that are transparent and accountable and not shielded in secrecy.

Any observer would recognize that the breakdown of the iron curtain, encouraged democratization processes in many parts or countries of Europe. Representation of governance systems must be learnt and transferred from one generation to the other. There is no better way of doing such but to constantly learn and practice democratic systems.

3.2. Goodwill Games in 1990 and Olympic Games in 1992

The 1990 Goodwill Games was the second edition of the international multi-sport event created by television entrepreneur and CNN founder Ted Turner between July 20th and August 5th in 1990. Following an inaugural edition in Moscow, the second games took place in Seattle, United States, highlighting the competition's role in fostering good Soviet–U.S. relations. The games were opened at the University of Washington's Husky Stadium with a speech by former U.S. President Ronald Reagan (Wilma, 2004).

This game made the Lithuanian team appear infamous amongst sports participants and spectators who questioned their reason for ignoring the games. However, their lack of support was because the United States government at that time, remained insistent on seeing the new found relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union work. This remained its clear goal. Little did anyone expect that in the course of the following months, the Soviet state will cease to exist.

Barely a year after gaining its new found independence from the Soviet states, the Lithuanian people were renewed with the aspirations and hopes of a motherland which they sought to protect and engage in. The sports tool remained the only vibrant mechanism of attracting the public and other notable observers from seeing the new passion and zeal presented by the Lithuanian people. The Lithuanian team exhibited cultural importance owing to restrictions a good number of them had experienced during the long years of Soviet rule.

3.3. Applying post-colonialism theory in the context of Lithuanian case study

In describing the Lithuanian experience, post-colonialism theory can be considered as the best to explain the Soviet state and its break away republics' relationship. At its simplest level, the postcolonialism is simply the product of human, experience, but human experience of the kind that has not typically been registered or represented at any institutional level. More particularly, it is the result of different cultural and national origins, the ways in which the colour of your skin or your place and circumstance of birth define the kind of life, privileged and pleasurable, or oppressed and exploited, that you will have in this world (Masood, 2019). Post-colonialism is the critical academic study of the cultural, political and economic legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands (Young, 2001). More specifically, it is a

critical theory analysis of the history, culture, literature, and discourse of (usually European) imperial power.

Having plundered and suppressed the Lithuanian people for many decades and converted Lithuania's natural resource – land and human capital, to its use for those number of decades, the Soviet Union only impoverished Lithuania and dominated the country as a nation, to the point Lithuania could not take even municipal decisions without the involvement of Moscow. This domination led to the pushback by Lithuanians that kept the colonial power's military forces out.

Subsequently, the position of the Lithuanian basketball team was simply a push back to respond to the many years of suppression and neglect by the Soviet Union as a colonialist. They discovered freedom, they expressed it by engaging in a sporting diplomacy that helped showcase them to the world as an independent state.

The post-colonial theory also looks at responses by the colonized and also studies the new forms colonialism had assumed even though it may appear that colonialism has ended (Elam, 2019). A number of recent political developments between Russia and Lithuania, which had occurred since the Russian invasion of Ukraine are notable examples.

4. CONCLUSION

Sports diplomacy has helped in enhancing coexistence amongst nations. In this research paper we analysed the historical roots of sports in general, and its influence in policy, diplomacy and culture in the context of Lithuanian case study, in particular. We analysed Lithuanian case study by applying the post-colonialism theory and identified that the will of nations may fragment and end the colonialist centralised power.

The analysis of Lithuanian case study in the context of post-colonial theory allows us better understand the reasons of Lithuanian basketball team resistance and the mechanisms how sports were misused by political regimes and non-governmental organisations. As a result, one may argue, that reasons for resistance included a desire to preserve national cultural interests and values on the one hand, and the ambition to „taste the freedom“ and break the iron curtain, at the other.

As of the fall of 2022, Lithuania and other formerly Soviet nations are at the forefront when it comes to responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While some of their approaches have been touted as aggressive, a look back at their history shows that they know what losing their freedom means from experience.

As for Lithuanian basketball, the efforts put in by the former Soviet Union players have paid off greatly as there have been a total of 15 players from the Baltic nation to make it to the National Basketball Association, two of those being Sabonis and Marciulionis. Perhaps most notably, Sabonis' 26-year-old son Domantas has played in the NBA since 2016 and has become a solid player. But it must be remembered that for every player to reach the highest level of the sport, there are a few that never made it due to Soviet rule. Finally, we would like to conclude our research paper with words of Michael Brearley „Sport is an area where aggression and the public demonstration of skills and of character are permitted, even encouraged.“

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