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International sports organizations as diplomatic actors.

The case of FIFA exerting influence on states¹

Abstract: Contemporary diplomacy has evolved into a network involving various new actors, including international sports organizations. The article is dedicated to the issue of the sports diplomacy of international bodies which are in charge of international sporting competitions, particularly the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), an organization that manages football on a global level.

The research presented in this article is a case study dedicated to the issue of the influence of international sports organizations on the governments of sovereign states, specifically FIFA. The objective of the research is to investigate whether international sports organizations are able to make governments change their political decisions. The hypothesis that has been investigated states that international sports governing bodies are diplomatic actors capable of influencing states.

Key words: FIFA, sports diplomacy, diplomacy, international sports organizations, sport and politics

Introduction

This article is dedicated to the issue of the sports diplomacy of international sports organizations (ISOs) that are in charge of international competition in particular sports. The objective of the research is to investigate if and how these bodies can exert their influence on governments. The research focuses on one of the most important and influential ISOs, namely the International Federation of Association Football (French: *Fédération Internationale de Football Association*, FIFA).

Today's diplomacy is very different from how it was in the past. It is believed to be evolving and, as a consequence, hierarchical diploma-

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tic forms and processes associated with the state are being replaced by network forms and processes that are more inclusive. In some areas traditional intergovernmental diplomacy has remained the most important, but in others non-state actors have gained significance (Hocking, 2016, pp. 72–73). Sub-state and regional authorities, international organizations, transnational corporations, celebrities and non-governmental organizations are among the new diplomatic actors (Adler-Nissen, 2016, p. 93). It therefore seems salient to speak of international sports organizations such as FIFA as diplomatic actors, with their own objectives and capabilities to achieve them. This research is therefore based on modernist theoretical approaches, such as liberal institutionalism and interdependence liberalism, which widen the scope of research beyond the system of states.

This article discusses sports diplomacy which is perceived by many authors to be a form of public diplomacy (Johns, 2014, pp. 7–8; Black, Peacock, 2013, p. 709) and explained as a way to utilize sport in order to achieve international goals (Houlihan, 2004, p. 217; Merkel, 2017, p. 29), with states as direct or at least indirect actors. Sports diplomacy can also be explained as the activity of international sports organizations affecting their relations with governments. According to Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Pigman (2014, p. 1099), as well as states' use of sport for diplomatic purposes, sports diplomacy is also about diplomatic representation, communication and negotiations between non-state actors that are held as a result of international sport. A similar view on the sports diplomacy of non-state actors such as FIFA or the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was presented by Aaron Beacom (2012), who proposed the concept of 'Olympism as diplomacy' in relation to the IOC and the Olympic Games. Beacom has employed the multi-stakeholder diplomacy model to analyze the Olympic Games as a diplomatic event in their own right (Beacom, 2012, p. 38).

Apart from theoretical investigations concerning sports diplomacy, some of which have been mentioned above, there are very few empirical studies related to international sports governing bodies as diplomatic actors. Most of them focus on the International Olympic Committee, for example the book authored by Aaron Beacom (2012) and articles by Verity Postlethwaite and Jonathan Grix (2016) or by Steve Jackson and Marcelle Dawson (2017). Among the studies dedicated to FIFA as a diplomatic actor, papers by Christiane Eisenberg (2005) or Heidrun Homburg (2006) should be mentioned. However, none of the available studies has directly referred to the FIFA's attempts to exert influence on the governments of sovereign states. The research presented in the article aims to fill this gap.

The diplomatic activity of international sports organizations can be observed in a number of situations, for example when they select the hosts of sports events under their control, decide to affiliate or not national sports federations, or negotiate with other international actors such as states. This article focuses on another dimension of ISO diplomacy, which is the ability to exert pressure on governments and other state authorities. States as sovereign actors have the right to make decisions concerning their territories. Nevertheless, in the history of sport there have been many cases when ISOs were able to make governments change their prior, sovereign decisions. For example, in the 1960s, the International Olympic Committee successfully made the French government agree to accept athletes from East Germany on French territory despite their earlier policy (IOC Session, 1964, October 7–9, p. 5, 9–10; Reddihan, 2017, p. 199). This research aims to investigate similar attempts made by FIFA.

Method and hypothesis

The research presented in the article is a case study. It refers to the issue of international non-governmental organizations and their diplomatic activity, which can be recognized in a number of ways which have been listed above. Exerting pressure on states, by which we understand attempts to influence the policies of the governments of sovereign states, is one of them. This research is dedicated to this particular form of diplomatic activity among ISOs. This phenomenon has been investigated using the example of FIFA, which is regarded as one of the most important and powerful international sports organizations, both economically and politically, mostly because of the global popularity of football. Therefore, a number of situations in which FIFA attempted to make governments change their earlier political decisions will be considered. Within the case study, process tracing has been used to determine the reasons why governments may comply with the requests or demands of ISOs.

The first research question that the article attempts to answer is whether international sports organizations are able to make governments change their political decisions. Another research question focuses on the reasons why sovereign states comply with the requests by non-governmental organizations. The hypothesis to be tested states that international sports governing bodies are diplomatic actors capable of exerting influence on states. This hypothesis will be tested using the smoking-gun test

(Gałganek, 2018, pp. 16–17), since the observation of effective attempts to change governments' decisions supports the conclusion that ISOs are capable of exerting influence on states.

In this research, FIFA has been treated as a homogenous body and its internal power struggles have been ignored, although it should be acknowledged that organizations such as FIFA are composed of representatives from different countries and with various political interests. The data necessary to conduct the research was collected from the digital archives of the FIFA Museum in Zurich, and included official FIFA press releases in particular. Additional data was collected from available publications.

Results

There are a number of ways in which ISOs such as FIFA might try to exert influence on governments, as well as a number of reasons for them to do so. It must be remembered, however, that such sports bodies tend to declare themselves politically neutral. In case of FIFA, political neutrality is one of its principles (Eisenberg, 2005, p. 386). In the history of sport there have been numerous situations in which such organizations actually took a political position, for example in the case of two Chinas in international sport. Despite the desire to remain neutral, for example by not allowing the discussion of political issues during the FIFA Congress (Homburg, 2006, p. 80), the decision to affiliate the national sport federation from one country or another has political and diplomatic significance of its own. Nevertheless, when it comes to FIFA's attempts to influence state policy, it is usually aimed at stopping states from making political decisions that affect sport, for example political bodies taking control over national sports federations. Another issue is related to human rights, since, on some occasions, the poor human rights record of a country has resulted in negative consequences for international sport. Sporting bodies such as FIFA are also capable of making states adopt particular laws, especially in relation to FIFA-controlled events that they want to host. Below, each of these issues will be analyzed.

As has been noted, FIFA as a non-governmental organization aims to be politically neutral, which is one of its principles. According to Article 4 of the FIFA Statutes, discrimination of any kind, including regarding political opinion, is strictly prohibited, while FIFA remains neutral in matters of politics and religion. The expectations regarding member associations

– the national football federations from various countries that are affiliated to FIFA – are similar. According to Article 15 of the FIFA Statutes, they should remain independent and neutral in matters of politics and religion, and should avoid any form of political interference (FIFA, 2018, August, p. 7). These requirements also imply that states should refrain from exercising some of their authority and should honor the autonomy of sports federations operating in their countries.

The requirement from member organizations to remain politically neutral and autonomous is one of the main reasons why FIFA is able to actively exert influence on states. In its history, it has on numerous occasions suspended these national associations as a result of external pressure, usually governmental interference. This refers, for example, to the national federations of Azerbaijan (FIFA, 2003, April 4), Guatemala (FIFA, 2004, January 9), Kenya (FIFA, 2004, June 2), Macau (2005, February 15), Yemen (FIFA, 2005, August 12), Greece (FIFA, 2006, June 3), Iran (FIFA, 2006, November 23), Cameroon (FIFA, 2013, July 4), and Nigeria (FIFA, 2014, July 9). Of course, political interference is not the only reason for suspending national federations. For example, in 2011 FIFA suspended the Football Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, under Article 14 of the FIFA Statutes, because it did not adopt the Statutes according to the FIFA and UEFA requirements. This suspension meant the loss of all membership rights by this federation, including participation in international competitions (FIFA, 2011, April 1a). This situation was not purely political though. It was linked to the fact that the General Assembly of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Federation did not achieve the necessary quorum of support to adopt the Statutes (FIFA, 2011, April 1b). In the context of this research, the suspensions due to governmental interference are the most important.

In FIFA's endeavors to protect the autonomy of its member associations, it is usually the national bodies that are directly affected – through their suspension. FIFA obviously does not have any power to exert direct pressure on governments, since formally they do not have any links. Still, usually, such suspensions soon lead to changes in government policy in line with FIFA's expectations. As a result, the suspensions of national federations are usually lifted shortly after their imposition. For example, in the case of the suspension of Cameroon on July 4, 2013, it was lifted on July 22, 2013 after the normalization committee was appointed (FIFA, 2013, July 22), while the suspension of Nigerian Football Federation in 2014 was only in force for nine days (FIFA, 2014, July 18).

As has been noted, in most cases there is no direct dialogue or negotiations between FIFA and governments and the whole discussion is held indirectly through the national federations. Nevertheless, on some occasions, discussions become more direct. For example, in 1999, FIFA ruled that that the suspension imposed by the Hungarian Government on the President of the Hungarian Football Federation must be lifted immediately, or otherwise the federation would be suspended by FIFA. Shortly afterwards, the Hungarian Minister of Sport lifted the suspension (FIFA, 1999, April 29). Another example took place in 2001, but can be traced back to 1999 when the Greek government proposed the National Sports Act, intended to give the state greater control over professional sport. The Hellenic Football Federation complained to FIFA (Garcia, Meier, 2013, p. 10), which decided that there was “past and ongoing governmental interference in the affairs of the Hellenic Football Federation” and requested the Greek government to immediately refrain from such activities and to amend the National Sports Act in order to ensure the independence and autonomy of the national federation. If those expectations were not met, FIFA threatened to suspend the Greek Federation (FIFA, 2001, March 20). Another example involved Spain. After its national team did not qualify to the 2008 Olympic Games, the Spanish government required its football federation to hold elections. FIFA President Joseph Blatter gave a press conference during his visit to Spain and suggested that FIFA Emergency Committee might suspend the Spanish Federation. In turn, when the Polish government suspended the board of its national football federation in response to its hesitant stance to sanction bribery and match fixing in 2007, FIFA and the European confederation UEFA demanded the removal of the government’s supervisors from the Polish Football Federation, suggesting that it risked suspension, withdrawal of Financial Assistance Programme payments and that Poland’s candidature to co-host the European Championships in 2012 would not be considered (Garcia, Meier, 2013, p. 18). In these cases, it could be observed that FIFA used an ultimatum instead of suspension to secure its objectives, but also that there was more direct communication with national governments, which in both cases agreed with FIFA’s demands in order to avoid the suspension of their football federations.

As well as securing the autonomy of its member associations, in its history FIFA has also used its position to exert pressure on states concerning their human rights record. A classic example of this kind of diplomatic engagement by FIFA, and ISOs generally, relates to apartheid in South

Africa. FIFA suspended the South African Federation in 1963, and reinstated it only after the end of apartheid (Nygård, 2013, p. 240). Reference to human rights could also be observed concerning the recognition of national football federations. In light of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, FIFA's General Secretary and its future President Joseph Blatter declared that communities that acquired independence should not demand sporting recognition until they could "prove they can observe human rights" (Blatter, 1992, p. 1). It is not clear whether such declarations were actually executed, but what matters here is that FIFA was at least indirectly attempting to influence the governments of the new states. On the other hand, though, there have also been cases when FIFA actually ignored information regarding serious human rights violations. For example, in 1973 it was reported that the military junta in Chile was using the national stadium as an internment camp and a venue for torturing political dissidents. The Soviet Union was supposed to play against Chile in World Cup qualifiers, so the Soviet officials requested the game was played in a neutral territory under those circumstances. FIFA sent a delegation to Chile, but on the grounds of declarations by Chilean officials it declined Soviet request (Sugden, Tomlinson, 1997, pp. 12–13). FIFA also granted the World Cup finals to Argentina and did not react to reported murders and torture of members of the political opposition by the ruling junta between 1976 and 1983 (Giulianotti, 2004, p. 359). This suggests FIFA's selective attitude towards protecting human rights.

Another issue is related to the ability of international sports organizations to convince states to amend their laws in line with their expectations. In the case of FIFA, this is strongly linked to its right to decide who can host football events under its jurisdiction, particularly the FIFA World Cup, which is regarded as a sporting mega-event. As a result, states hosting such events make various legal concessions to FIFA. For example, before the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018, the Russian administration passed a number of exceptions to existing legislation, which stipulated changes to eight codes. These were designed to safeguard FIFA's marketing and sponsorship revenues, while others, for example, limited public gatherings during the event (Müller, 2017, p. 1126). By accepting such requests to amend legislation, governments obviously limit their own benefits from hosting sports events and in a way accept limitations of their sovereignty over their territories, but since they desire to host sports mega-events, *inter alia* for the sake of public diplomacy and nation branding, they are willing to accept these conditions.

Discussion

There are a number of ways in which FIFA can try to exert influence on governments. First and foremost, it protects the autonomy of its member associations, since on some occasions governments have attempted to increase their control over national bodies responsible for football. This might happen through amending sports legislation or by suspending national football officials. Some of these activities might be justified by problems in the functioning of these federations. In such cases, FIFA usually reacts by either suspending these member associations or by threatening to do so. Although analyzing FIFA's effectiveness in protecting the autonomy of its member federations was not the goal of this research, it appears that FIFA has been quite successful in this field. Suspensions, both threatened and implemented, that were examined in the research resulted in changes in governments' policies in line with FIFA's demands. Another way in which FIFA affects governments involves hosting football events under its control, such as the FIFA World Cup. States hosting such events are expected to amend their laws in order to better protect the interests of FIFA and its stakeholders, particularly in the field of protecting marketing rights. FIFA has also attempted to use its position in order to foster the protection of human rights, but its activity in this area has been inconsistent.

The processes by which non-governmental organizations are capable of changing states' policies lead to the question of the reasons why sovereign states comply with their demands. An answer to this question is most probably connected to the global popularity of sport and, in this case, football. There are a number of potential benefits that a state or a government may gain from competing in international football or hosting football events. States which are successful in the Olympic Games and in international football events are believed to increase their nation brands (Anholt, 2009, p. 24), while hosting sports mega-events is a typical public diplomacy tool (Nye, 2013, p. 570; Chalip, Costa, 2005, p. 125). The so-called 'contested states' are interested in simple participation in international sport, since membership of international sports bodies is regarded as a prerequisite of statehood (Keys, 2010, p. 259; Levermore, 2004, p. 21). The lack of the opportunity to compete in international sport may also pose an internal problem for a government, as it may be criticized by citizens disappointed by the inability of the teams from their country to compete internationally. As a result, states are not interested in confrontation with ISOs such as FIFA and in most cases decide to comply with FIFA's expectations.

The argument presented in this article is not to question states' sovereignty. Speaking of the activity of international sports organizations or states' participation in international sport as limitations to their sovereignty would be an exaggeration, since international sports organizations such as FIFA are not supranational institutions. They are non-governmental organizations which operate in the transnational arena. Governments simply decide to act in line with the expectations of actors such as FIFA. This is mostly due to their need to reach public diplomacy goals, since international sport is a convenient medium for this purpose.

It is also important to point out that the diplomatic engagement of FIFA that was analyzed in the article is not the same as political engagement. In fact, the pressure exerted on governments was rather aimed at keeping politics out of sport. FIFA, like other international sports governing bodies, officially declares neutrality and its functioning in practice appears to confirm this declaration. Of course, in some situations it simply had to take a political stance, as any decision would entail supporting the interests of one of the conflicting sides, such as in the case of the so-called Chinese question in international sport; when the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan) both demanded to be the sole representative of China in FIFA. Nevertheless, in the analyzed context, FIFA's pressure exerted on states appeared to be free from political leanings.

Concluding remarks

The research conducted for this article indicated a number of ways in which FIFA was able to exert influence on governments. This led to the conclusion that international sports governing bodies such as FIFA are able to make the governments of sovereign states change their earlier decisions and policies, in line with its expectations. Not all attempts to influence states by FIFA have been successful, but the fact that many of them resulted in a swift change of the state's policy appears to verify the hypothesis stating that international sports governing bodies are diplomatic actors capable of influencing states, despite the fact that FIFA in most cases communicated with governments indirectly, through their member associations. It has also been observed that governments usually comply with the demands of international sports organizations because participation in international sport is important for states, as it enables the achievement of numerous external and internal objectives, particularly related to their national image.

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Międzynarodowe organizacje sportowe jako aktorzy dyplomatyczni. Przypadek FIFA wywierającej wpływ na państwa

Streszczenie

Współczesna dyplomacja przyjmuje coraz bardziej sieciową formę, co objawia się zaangażowaniem nowych aktorów, w tym międzynarodowych organizacji sportowych. Artykuł poświęcony jest zagadnieniu dyplomacji sportowej organizacji sportowych kontrolujących międzynarodową rywalizację sportową, na przykładzie Międzynarodowej Federacji Piłki Nożnej (FIFA). Badanie, którego dotyczy artykuł, stanowi studium przypadku poświęcone kwestii wywierania przez międzynarodową organizację sportową nacisku na rządy suwerennych państw, na przykładzie FIFA. Celem badania jest sprawdzenie czy organizacje sportowe są w stanie sprawić, aby rządy zmieniły swoje decyzje polityczne. Hipoteza, która została poddana weryfikacji zakłada, iż międzynarodowe organizacje sportowe są podmiotami dyplomatycznymi zdolnymi wpływać na państwa.

Słowa kluczowe: FIFA, dyplomacja sportowa, dyplomacja, międzynarodowe organizacje sportowe, sport i polityka