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Promoting a Strategic Approach to EU Sports Diplomacy

***Transnational Actors in Sport Diplomacy:
Perspectives of Cooperation***

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1. Introduction and Background

*“From antiquity to modernity,
sport has been used in the international arena
to initiate or feed exchanges,
to project prestige,
to serve as factor of influence.”*

Laurent Thieule (Sport and Citizenship),
Strasbourg, Council of Europe, November 2019.

1.1. Sport diplomacy: a new territory

Speeches, publications, and reflexions on sport diplomacy tend to start with a justification of the topic’s timeliness and relevance, as if they needed to apologise to both sportspeople and diplomats for straying from their well-trodden paths. They generally do so by referring to Nelson Mandela’s oft-quoted words about the “power” of sport to “change the world”, or by recalling the “Olympic Truce” of ancient Greece as evidence for the age-old, inevitable, interrelation between sport and politics.

This perceived need for justification reveals that sport diplomacy, as a field of academic research, is still a very young sub-discipline, bringing together a variety of different approaches and perspectives. The recent attempts to provide a conceptual framework for the field¹ attest to this view, and simultaneously confirm that as the 21st century unfolds, there is a growing awareness on all sides that sport’s relevance in international relations can no longer be ignored.

Sportspeople have become more aware of the political implications of their public statements and activities beyond the arena, while diplomats are increasingly interested in sport’s added value for their own efforts in public diplomacy. Both draw on academic expertise to help them make sense of what their intuition suggests with increasing clarity: sport does play a role in how different actors around the globe perceive each other, present themselves, and try to influence each other.

When the author of these lines conducted, twenty years ago, numerous interviews with the organisers of the 1998 and 2006 World Cup respectively, including political decision-makers in France and Germany who had provided their support to these mega-events, not a single interlocutor was familiar with the term “soft power”.² Today, the concept has made it into the mainstream vocabulary and has become a cliché of speeches about Europe’s role in the world.

Nation-states (and their ministries of foreign affairs) are, however, no longer the only actors to seek to take advantage of sport’s potential in international or intercultural relations. There has been a proliferation of sport actors, both on sub-national and supra-national level. In his recent theory of sport diplomacy, Stuart Murray devotes three dense chapters to the very diverse typology of “non-state sporting actors”, ranging from small NGOs to the global governance

¹ Stuart Murray, *Sports Diplomacy. Origins, Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 2018.
Simon Rofe, (ed.), *Sports Diplomacy. Games within Games*. Manchester University Press, 2018.

² Albrecht Sonntag, *Les identités du football européen*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2008.

bodies like FIFA or the IOC, and forming what he calls the “international society of sport”³. Even more recently, a consortium of civil society organisations set out to conceptualise what may be referred to as “grassroots sport diplomacy”, giving testimony to a new self-perception and self-confidence of grassroots actors.⁴

The global landscape of sport diplomacy is a complicated one, and a quickly evolving one with that. It is so far characterised by organic empirical evolution rather than full conceptual clarity. There are, however, increasing attempts by different actors to address the field with a strategic approach, an observation reflected in the name of the international project to which this report contributes.

As a new actor on the world stage of sport diplomacy, which has only just been granted a competence in the field of sport by the Lisbon Treaty (2011), the European Union adds one more layer to an already complex environment. Although some of its foreign policy objectives may resemble those of major nation-states engaging in sport diplomacy, it is clearly not a state in the classical sense. Its tools, activities, and possibilities are necessarily different. At the same time, it is not the first international organisation of intergovernmental and/or supranational nature to venture into sport-related diplomatic activities.

1.2. The European Union’s entry into the field of sports diplomacy

To put it bluntly, there is little doubt that the European Union is perceived by traditional sport actors as an unexperienced newcomer at best, a kind of “legal alien” in this territory at worst. Sport was traditionally considered a preserve of the nation-state, and the international governing bodies of sport were composed in principle by national federations, with the constraint of upholding the narrative of the “apolitical” nature of sport and entire independence of the national governing bodies from political interference.

There are, however, several other international organisations that are already engaged in interaction with the global sport community. These are UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the Commonwealth, and the Francophonie. Section 2 of this report will provide an overview on the different approaches of these four organisations, while section 3 will formulate some recommendations for potentially meaningful cooperation perspectives.

Within the European Institutions themselves, awareness of sport’s potential in external policy is slowly increasing. The detailed chronology provided in the project’s initial background paper authored by Richard Parrish and Thierry Zintz⁵ retrieves how the topic made it onto the European agenda in recent years.

The most visible sport-related activity of the European Union is the flurry of sport projects mainly conducted by civil society actors that have been supported by the ERASMUS+ programme over recent years. For long-standing promoters of sport as educational tool in intercultural relations, conflict resolution and peace building, the slowly growing consideration

³ Murray (2018), p. 135

⁴ “Grassroots Sport Diplomacy – Overview, Mapping & Definitions” <https://diplomacy.isca.org/resources/>

⁵ Zintz, T. and Parrish, R. (2019). “Promoting a Strategic Approach to EU Sports Diplomacy – Background Paper”, pp. 7-12. Download under <https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/law/files/2019/05/Sports-Diplomacy-Background-Paper-v2.pdf> (all weblinks in this report have been consulted between January and May 2020).

for sport on a European level is a logical evolution. After all, the European Union's very reason of being is perfectly aligned on the humanistic objectives pursued by most not-for-profit sport actors.

ERASMUS+ grants high visibility. According to one of the experts interviewed for this report, it remains "the single most appreciated sub-brand of the community, even in the United Kingdom". The European Union thus "has done an important step in including sport with culture and education, and adding it very explicitly to ERASMUS+".⁶

Among the members of the High-Level Group on Sport Diplomacy set up in 2015, there was a strong consensus that sport should not be confined within ERASMUS+, but become the object of transversal cooperation between different DGs of the European Commission. Recently there has been some encouraging evidence in this direction, especially in sports-related projects in the Western Balkans outside the ERASMUS+ funding, jointly supported by the Commission's Directorate General EAC (responsible for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture) and DG NEAR (in charge of European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations).

This report and its recommendations are grounded on the assumption that awareness of the potential benefits of sport diplomacy for the pursuit of EU foreign policy objectives will continue to increase among EU institutions. To quote the above-mentioned expert again, "sport diplomacy is a concept that has come of age", acknowledging that both scholars and diplomats may have been "blasé about sport being something rather light". Today, "it would be foolish to overlook the feelings of cohesion that sport can generate. Sport can connect citizens, break down barriers and serve post-conflict dialogue."⁷ In other words: "It needs to be taken seriously."⁸

One way of taking sport seriously on a European level is making it the object of cooperation with international organisations.

1.3. Methodology

This report is based on a review of key documents relating to activities of sports diplomacy by transnational actors. It also integrates findings from research in sports diplomacy, although, unsurprisingly and understandably, the field is dominated by analyses centred on the actorness of the nation-state or major sports governance bodies (SGBs). The intervention of transnational political organisations have not yet been investigated by academic literature.

In addition to the document research, five in-depth expert interviews – both with diplomacy scholars and officials from different institutions – were carried out between January and June 2020. Given the relatively sensitive character of the report's topic – transnational, institutional cooperation in the making – these interviews were conducted in a fully confidential setting.

⁶ Interview with a foreign policy scholar, June 2000.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

2. Transnational Actors in Sport Diplomacy

The following section sheds light on the sports-related activities of four different actors of transnational⁹ dimension, whose reason of being and explicit mandate may be considered of diplomatic nature.

2.1. UNESCO

As one of the best-known intergovernmental organisations of global reach, with the mandate “to build peace through international cooperation”, UNESCO may be considered a “natural” actor in worldwide sport diplomacy.

The full name of UNESCO includes the key adjectives “educational, scientific and cultural”. Although all three terms may be perceived to be somehow connected to sport, the latter is not explicitly mentioned. In the institution’s organisational structure, rather than under “Education” or “Culture”, sport is, somewhat revealingly, listed under the “Social and Human Sciences” programme, where the two themes “Anti-doping” as well as “Physical education and sport” figure at the bottom of a list of nineteen areas of work.

Without wanting to belittle the attention paid to sport within UNESCO’s very broad range of mandates and activities, it is clear that it cannot be considered a priority. To be fair, some sport-related publications cut across the different work programmes and are flagged on various pages of the UNESCO website, such as the 2015 report on the fight against racism and discrimination in international football.¹⁰

While some date the United Nations’ consideration for sport as educational tool to the 1959 “Declaration on the Rights of the Child”¹¹, documentary evidence suggests that it is mainly in the 1970s that UNESCO started to view sport as a suitable tool for its purposes. It organised its first “International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport in the Education of Youth” in April 1976 in Paris. This conference is better known today under the acronym “MINEPS”, one of UNESCO’s principal organs in shaping its sport policy. The first MINEPS was instrumental in the development of what became two years later the “[International Charter of Physical Education and Sport](#)”¹² and the simultaneous establishment of the [Intergovernmental Committee for Physical Education and Sport](#), generally referred to as CIGEPS.

The “International Charter” was adopted at UNESCO’s 20th General Conference, as the first document to establish, in the first of its twelve articles, sport and physical education as a “fundamental right for all”. Between 2013 and 2015, it was revised and updated¹³

⁹ In the context of this report, we use the term “transnational” as an umbrella term, encompassing both supranational institutions (such as the European Commission) and more traditional, intergovernmental institutions (the Council of Europe, or the United Nations, to name but two examples).

¹⁰ Sonntag, A. and Ranc, D. (2015). *Colour? What Colour? Report on the fight against discrimination and racism in football*, Paris: UNESCO, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000235721>.

¹¹ Beutler, I. (2008). “Sport serving development and peace: Achieving the goals of the United Nations through sport”. *Sport in society*, 2008, vol. 11, no 4, p. 359-369.

¹² <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000216489>

¹³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/physical-education-and-sport/sport-charter/the-evolution-of-the-charter/>

following a large consultation among the member governments and beyond, including sport practitioners, experts from academia and activists from NGOs. It was adopted under its new name “[International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport](#)”¹⁴ on 18 November, 2015 at the 38th General Conference. According to UNESCO, the Charter has the vocation to orient and support policy- and decision-making in sport.

The Kazan Action Plan

The most significant recent document that currently inspires UNESCO’s actions in the field of sports is the [Kazan Action Plan](#)¹⁵, named after the city who hosted the sixth MINEPS conference in 2017.

The Kazan Action Plan (KAP) is an important profession of faith in sport’s capacity to be an “enabler” of sustainable development and peace and a commitment to go beyond declarations on sport policy toward measurable implementation of concrete actions. The KAP is based on twenty specific policy areas identified by the so-called “MINEPS Sport Policy Follow-up Framework” (pp. 5-15) grouped under three main objectives

- Developing a comprehensive vision of inclusive access for all to sport;
- Maximizing the contributions of sport to sustainable development and peace;
- Protecting the integrity of sport.

The five major actions identified by the KAP are the following

1. Elaborate an advocacy tool presenting evidence-based arguments for investments in physical education, physical activity and sport.
2. Develop common indicators for measuring the contribution of physical education, physical activity and sport to prioritized SDGs and targets.
3. Unify and further develop international standards supporting sports ministers’ interventions in the field of sport integrity.
4. Conduct a feasibility study on the establishment of a Global Observatory for women, sport, physical education and physical activity.
5. Develop a clearinghouse for sharing information according to the sport policy follow-up framework developed for MINEPS VI.

For each of these actions, developed in detail on pages 17 to 26 of the KAP, “potential key partners” are identified. The European Union is explicitly listed for actions 1 and 5 (which does, of course, not mean that it would not be welcome as partner in the other three actions).

¹⁴ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13150&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- download here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000235409>

¹⁵ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259362>;
summary graph here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368777>

Cooperation with the European Union

Avenues of possible cooperation with between UNESCO and the European Union were officially agreed upon in a [Memorandum of Understanding](#)¹⁶ signed as early as October 2012, shortly after the coming into force of the Treaty of Lisbon and the opening of a UNESCO Liaison Office in Brussels¹⁷. The document has recently (January 2019) been completed by an update of a “Financial and Administrative Framework Agreement (FAFA)” aligned with the current EU Financial Regulation.

The document, very general in tone by definition, emphasizes the extent to which the two organisations share fundamental values and the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (now called “SDGs”). While some areas of enhanced dialogue and strengthened cooperation are identified in the third section of the memorandum (education and culture, media, science and innovation, human rights, ethics of science and even an “integrated maritime policy”), sport is, to little surprise, not explicitly mentioned.

In the meantime, however, the liaison office has included sport in the scope of activities of the officer(s) entrusted with cooperation in the field of “culture”. It also noteworthy that the Kazan Action Plan, recalling that “the responsibility for [its] implementation cannot rest with UNESCO of the CIGEPS alone”, but can only be successfully implemented if, in addition to UNESCO member states, “other intergovernmental, government and non-government stakeholders share this responsibility” (p. 16). This statement may definitely be considered a call for more and close cooperation between transnational actors of different nature and scope, in priority the European Union and the Council of Europe.

Beyond such declarations of intentions, cooperation between the European Union and UNESCO is likely to be project-based. The first significant sports-related joint project is named “[Culture and Sports for Social Cohesion and Sustainable Reintegration of Afghan Returnees and IDPs \(Hamdeli\)](#)”¹⁸. Its implementation may be considered a genuine step forward but also leaves a series of questions open. These will be dealt with below in section 3.1.

2.2. The Council of Europe

Created in 1949, the Council of Europe was the first intergovernmental organisation to include sport in its realm of activities, implicitly at first, in the European Cultural Convention adopted in 1954, more explicitly in a second stage, in 1963, when the “European sport certificate” was established, aimed at simultaneously promoting the participation of youth in sporting activity and the values of European solidarity.¹⁹

As William Gasparini sums it up, “the primary objective of Council of Europe policy in the field of sport was not to replace national policies, but to defend certain common

¹⁶ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco-eu_mou_8_october_2012.pdf

¹⁷ <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/brussels/about>

¹⁸ https://en.unesco.org/eu-partnership/sustainable_reintegration_afghan_returnees

¹⁹ William Gasparini, “The Council of Europe and sport: origin and circulation of a European sporting model”, *Encyclopédie pour une histoire nouvelle de l'Europe* (2019), <http://ehne.fr/en/node/2437>.

principles, and to combat certain phenomena deemed contrary to the ‘values of Europe’ (doping, spectator violence, discrimination in sport, homophobia).”²⁰

In 1972, the [European Sport Charter](#) (updated since), was adopted as a framework for governmental policies allowing citizens to exercise their right to sporting activities. In 1977 a specific Committee for the Development of Sport was created, giving testimony to the increasing relevance of sport in the Council’s activities. In 2007, the Committee was replaced by a full-fledged intergovernmental agreement named the [Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sports \(EPAS\)](#), which today includes 38 signatory states.

For one of the experts interviewed for this report, EPAS sees itself as a “facilitator for member states, a provider of conceptual support, and a coordinator of national initiatives”.²¹ This perception is very much in line with the official self-definition as “platform for intergovernmental sports co-operation between the public authorities of its member states”, with the aim to “encourage dialogue between public authorities, sports federations and NGOs.”²²

The most tangible results of EPAS’s mission are the major conventions in favour of sport’s integrity that it has managed to adopt in recent years, namely the [Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competition](#) (2014, also known as the Macolin Convention)²³, and the [Convention on Integrated Safety, Security, and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events](#) (2016)²⁴. They follow in their intent the previous two conventions adopted in 1985 and 1989 respectively. The first of them, on [Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sports Events](#)²⁵, was prompted by the tragedy at the Heysel stadium in 1985²⁶; the second one was the [Anti-Doping Convention](#)²⁷.

EPAS declares itself explicitly open for project-based cooperation with other international actors, especially the European Union. As the institution’s current factsheet states, “since 2014, EPAS has strengthened its operational co-operation capacity by developing joint projects with the European Union and the sports movement, for example

²⁰ See also the 2004 brochure “50 years of the European Cultural Convention”, https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/CulturalConvention/Source/Bilan50_EN.pdf

²¹ Interview with an official, January 2020.

²² “EPAS: Factsheet” (February 2020), <https://rm.coe.int/10-factsheet-en-epas-2019/16809398bc>.

²³ Tom Serby, “The Council of Europe Convention on Manipulation of Sports Competitions: the best bet for the global fight against match-fixing?”, *International Sports Law*, 15, 83–100 (2015).

²⁴ Council of Europe Convention on an Integrated Safety, Security and Service Approach at Football Matches and Other Sports Events (3 July 2016), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680666d0b>

²⁵ “European Convention on Spectator Violence and Misbehaviour at Sports Events and in particular at Football Matches” (19 August 1985), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007a086>

²⁶ Albrecht Sonntag, “30 years ago – European football’s major lieu de mémoire” (29 May 2015), <https://free.ideasonurope.eu/2015/05/29/30-years-ago-european-footballs-major-lieu-de-memoire-2/>.

²⁷ “Anti-Doping Convention” (16 November 1989) <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168007b0e0>, completed by the “Additional Protocol to the Anti-Doping Convention” (12 September 2002), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680081569>.

on the topics of gender equality, child protection (in particular the fight against sexual abuse in sport), and on good governance standards.”²⁸

While there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of this declaration, some observers would tend to put it into perspective. As was highlighted in one of the expert interviews, the efforts made by EPAS are highly commendable, but “sport remains a secondary issue at the Council of Europe, including in budgetary terms. Despite a higher awareness of sport’s potential in international relations and visible progress over the last five years, they seem to be permanently under the burden of proof for their relevance”.²⁹

Beyond these considerations, the Council of Europe is known to have been navigating through uncertain budgetary waters in recent years, especially with regard to the part of the budget contributed by Russia. The interruption of the Russian contribution between 2017 and 2019 has forced the Council to establish contingency plans.³⁰ It seems obvious that the ongoing debate on Russian membership³¹ will affect the Council’s sport-related activities in two harmful ways. First, in a period of severe budgetary measures, available funds for sports projects are highly likely to be reduced (as are human resources in this area). Furthermore, in the light of the pending four-year ban of Russia from the Olympics and other major sporting events³², the credibility of one of the Council of Europe’s major fields of action may also be significantly damaged.

Against this backdrop, it may be expected that EPAS will undergo some changes over the next years, in organisation, focus, and capability. These will no doubt affect inter-institutional cooperation.

2.3. The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is an intergovernmental organisation of currently 71 nations and territories that sees itself as “a family of peoples”, bound by a common heritage in language, culture, law, education and democratic traditions.³³

The most recent version of its charter, dated 2012, does not mention sport explicitly. But one of the most concrete embodiments of the Commonwealth today are certainly the Commonwealth Games, launched as early as 1930 under the name “British Empire Games” and organised every four years by the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF).

²⁸ “EPAS: Factsheet” (February 2020), <https://rm.coe.int/10-factsheet-en-epas-2019/16809398bc>.

²⁹ Interview with an official (external to the CoE), March 2020.

³⁰ See for instance the declaration of the Council’s Parliamentary Assembly of June 2019: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=27992&lang=en>.

³¹ See for instance reports by Deutsche Welle (<https://www.dw.com/en/russia-in-the-council-of-europe-what-does-it-mean-for-human-rights/a-49368822>), France24 (<https://www.france24.com/en/20190628-russia-undiplomatic-return-council-europe-ukraine>), or The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/world/europe/council-of-europe-russia-crimea.html>).

³² The ban was pronounced by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in December 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/50710598>); the Russian anti-doping agency’s appeal is now due to be heard by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in November 2020 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sport-doping-russia-ban/doping-cas-to-hear-appeal-against-russias-olympic-ban-in-november-idUSKBN2392D3>).

³³ <http://www.commonwealthofnations.org/commonwealth/> consulted February 2020

Since 2000, this well-known sporting mega-event has been completed by the Commonwealth Youth Games of more modest scope.

According to its current strategic plan called “Transformation 2022”³⁴, the CGF’s vision is to “to build peaceful, sustainable and prosperous communities globally by inspiring Commonwealth Athletes to drive the impact and ambition of all Commonwealth Citizens through Sport”.

As an object of academic scrutiny, the Commonwealth Games have produced a flurry of impact studies relating to urban regeneration, tourism, and general issues of “legacy”, but relatively little consideration is given to their role as sports diplomacy tool other than for the respective host city or nation. Discussing the Commonwealth Games as nation branding opportunity for the host, as Jarvie, Murray and Macdonald do in the case of the Glasgow edition in 2014³⁵, which coincided with the Scottish independence referendum campaign³⁶, does not say much about the community spirit within a transnational organisation that this event is meant to project.

Beyond the Commonwealth Games, the organisation created in 2005 “The Commonwealth Advisory Body on Sport (CABOS)”, as an independent body providing advice on sport policy issues, “particularly as it relates to Sport for Development and Peace (SDP), and protecting the integrity of sport”.³⁷ Once per year, CABOS produces a detailed, publicly available statement taking a position on the most pressing concerns and issues of the Commonwealth sport environment, especially with regard to integrity and alignment of sport activities with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While its existence can only be viewed in positive terms, it seems to have neither the means nor the vocation to act as a sports diplomacy tool outside the structure of the Commonwealth itself.

2.4. The Francophonie

The *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF) is an intergovernmental institution based on a shared language and cultural values. Under the current leadership of Louise Mushikiwabo (from Rwanda), the organisation, which counts 54 member-states, 7 associated members and 27 so-called “observers”, celebrates its 50 years of existence all over the year 2020. Its proclaimed aim is to work for the “political, educational, economic and cultural cooperation among its member countries, in the service of their populations”.³⁸

The most visible sports-related tool of the OIF’s global diplomacy are the Francophonie Games (*Les Jeux de la Francophonie*), which bring together, every four years, young people from the member countries. The *Jeux de la Francophonie* are much younger than

³⁴ https://thecgf.com/sites/default/files/2018-03/Transformation-2022_updateJul15_0.pdf consulted February 2020

³⁵ Jarvie, G., Murray, S, and Macdonald, S (2017). “Promoting Scotland, diplomacy and influence through sport”, *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 26, no 1, p. 1-22.

³⁶ See also Jarvie, G. “Sport, the 2014 Commonwealth Games and the Scottish referendum”, in: *The Routledge handbook of sport and politics*, 2017, p. 209-221.

³⁷ <https://thecommonwealth.org/commonwealth-advisory-body-sport> consulted February 2020

³⁸ <https://www.francophonie.org/la-francophonie-en-bref-754> consulted February 2020

the Commonwealth Games: their first edition took place in Morocco in 1989; the next one will be hosted in Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo) in 2021.

Like the Commonwealth Games – albeit on an altogether smaller scale – the *Jeux de la Francophonie* provide an opportunity of gathering around sport for both ordinary sport fans and high-level actors of politics and business. And they give, of course, an occasion to the host country to step up their touristic capacities. Yet, beyond sport, they also explicitly wish to promote artistic and cultural exchange as well as sustainable development.

Another diplomatic tool of the *Francophonie* is the so-called *Grand Témoin*, a kind of cultural ambassador, generally a personality of international reputation, whose mission is basically to lobby in favour of the place of the French language within the International Olympic Committee. For the forthcoming Tokyo Games, the famous chef Thierry Marx was appointed³⁹. The very existence of the *Grand Témoin* highlights of course the outstanding importance given to the language issue within *la Francophonie*, a notable difference to the Commonwealth's ambition and self-perception.

Less visible, but more important than the showcase of the *Jeux de la Francophonie*, is the standing Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth and Sports (*Conférence des ministres de la Jeunesse et des Sports – CONFEJES*), created in 1969, i.e. eighteen years before the idea of the mega-event was floated. It is revealing that the OIF's most recent fundamental Charter (2005)⁴⁰, only mentions sport once, in article 2, when referring to the CONFEJES as one of its permanent institutions. Scheduled every two years, the CONFEJES is a space of high-level, ministerial dialogue for the governments of its 43 members.⁴¹ Its mission is very explicitly focused on “promoting the participation and social integration of young people within society”, which positions sports very clearly as a tool rather than an end in itself.

The CONFEJES has no equivalent within the Commonwealth. Its intergovernmental activities are richer than its low public name recognition suggests. Its relative financial dependence on the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is, however, not a particularly encouraging prospect, since, in the words of an expert interviewed for this report, the latter no longer has the means to sustain everything that happens in francophone Africa.

On a more general note, the comparison between Commonwealth and *Francophonie* suggest that the latter, while its work is more inward-looking, seems to be, by its very existence, more of a diplomatic tool in the (indirect) service of the leading member⁴², whose name already rings in the name of the organisation itself. And while the Commonwealth, when it comes to sport, seems to count on the organisation of its landmark mega-event as resource of prestige and worldwide recognition, the OIF is more modest, both in the size of its activities and the tone of its communication.

³⁹ <https://international.franceolympique.com/international/actus/8108-thierry-marx---ep.-1---je-ne-minscri-pas-seulement-dans-une-rflexion-franco-franaise--.html> consulted February 2020.

⁴⁰ https://www.francophonie.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/charte_francophonie_antananarivo_2005.pdf

⁴¹ <https://confejes.org/les-missions-de-la-confejes/> consulted February 2020

⁴² Massart-Piérard, F. (2007) “La Francophonie, un nouvel intervenant sur la scène internationale”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 14, no 1, p. 69-93. Gazeau-Secret, A (2003). “Soft power: l'influence par la langue et la culture”, *Revue internationale et stratégique*, No. 1, p. 103-110. Gazeau-Secret, A (2010). “Francophonie et diplomatie d'influence”, *Géoéconomie*, No. 55, p. 39-56.

2.5. Conclusions

Beyond the myriad of private non-state actors of transnational reach and ambition, especially NGOs of different type and scope, there is only a handful of public organisations that are both transnational in nature and engaged in significant activities or programmes that may be classified as belonging to the field of sports diplomacy. Four of them have been briefly reviewed in this section of the report. The fifth, and most recent player in this field, is the European Union.

Does it make sense for the European Union to develop more systematic relations or partnerships with one or more of the four players? As has been seen, punctual or more regular cooperations are already engaged with both the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

The value statements made by any of the four actors referred to in this section demonstrate a wide overlap with both the EU's proclaimed values and the perception of sport's positive and constructive role in projecting and promoting these values.

There is, however, a significant difference between, on the one hand, UNESCO and the Council of Europe, and, on the other hand, the Commonwealth and the Francophonie.

The former two have been set up by a community of equals, formulating and defending the common interest of their members. They have a fundamentally inclusive purpose, even if in the case of the Council of Europe, this is limited by the geographical boundaries of Europe (as flexible as these might be at times).

The latter two are, despite their international and even intercontinental dimension, which sometimes reaches out beyond the boundaries of the linguistic and cultural community they claim to represent, fundamentally based on an exclusive premise. And the historically grown dominant position of the former colonial power within the respective community inevitably leads both organisations, at least implicitly, to serve as enhancer of national prestige or amplifier of national soft power resources.

Against this backdrop, while there is no reason to rule out punctual, jointly organised, sports-related activities between the European Union and the Commonwealth or the Francophonie in certain geographical areas, UNESCO and the Council of Europe appear to be more natural partners in cooperation for the EU.

3. Cooperation Perspectives for the European Union – Recommendations

This report concludes with a short list of recommendations in view of engaging, increasing, or improving cooperation between the European Union and UNESCO and/or the Council of Europe in the field of sports diplomacy.

3.1. Relations with UNESCO

On its website the UNESCO Liaison Office in Brussels considers UNESCO and the European Union “close and natural partners”, pointing to shared values and objectives and reminding the reader in passing that “the EU is currently the third largest donor to the Organization”.⁴³

In the context of the very serious financing and organisational crisis that UNESCO has been undergoing since 2011⁴⁴, following the decision of the United States to stop paying their membership dues (a sudden budget cut of approximately 25 per cent), this reminder of the European Union’s financial contribution to the functioning of UNESCO is not anecdotal.

It is therefore hardly surprising that one of the experts interviewed for this report sees “growing interest in cooperation from both parts” and a significant potential for “synergies”⁴⁵. For both organisations, cooperation could be a win-win situation, both in general terms and in ear-marked project funding. While European funding represents a reliable resource, UNESCO’s global dimension can extend the EU’s territorial outreach. This is exemplified in the first significant sport-related project already briefly mentioned in section 2.1 above: “[Culture and Sports for Social Cohesion and Sustainable Reintegration of Afghan Returnees and IDPs \(Hamdeli\)](#)”.⁴⁶

This large project of important societal impact (with a budget of several million €) is financed by DEVCO⁴⁷. What may look at first sight like an implementation of one of the recommendations from the Sports Diplomacy High-Level Group in 2016 – the mainstreaming of sports projects in development policies and programmes – turns out to be a project where sport is simply considered one tool among others. It is also a project on which the European Commission does not communicate through its own channels, but which seems to be implemented by UNESCO alone. At closer scrutiny, it appears as a random one-off project rather than the beginning of a more structured approach.

Moreover, according to another expert interviewed for this report, DEVCO would be in a position to conduct sports-related TAIEX⁴⁸ activities in countries concerned by the European Neighbourhood Policy, but seems to persist in considering sport as mainly

⁴³ <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/brussels>

⁴⁴ Hufner, K. (2017), The Financial Crisis of UNESCO after 2011: Political Reactions and Organizational Consequences, *Global Policy*, Vol. 8, Issue 5, pp. 96-101.

⁴⁵ Interview with an official, February 2020.

⁴⁶ https://en.unesco.org/eu-partnership/sustainable_reintegration_afghan_returnees – “IDPs” stands for “Internally Displaced People”.

⁴⁷ DEVCO stands for the Directorate General of International Cooperation and Development

⁴⁸ TAIEX stands for “Technical Assistance and Information Exchange”. It is a development instrument aimed at aspiring candidate or neighbouring countries.

national competence rather than a priority on the European level.⁴⁹ Clearly, the link between sports and value promotion has not yet reached the level of transversality that the High-Level Group called for.

In one of the expert interviews, it was suggested that the EU should be both “more sensitive and more assertive on the role of sport” in its external policy, ideally showing commitment to the objectives of the Kazan Action Plan (KAP) and getting engaged with KAP working groups. It was considered that the KAP, rather than be perceived in a “competitive” manner, could serve as “a common denominator” or “useful road map”.⁵⁰

Recommendations:

- If the current European Commission wishes to give flesh to its claim to develop a “geopolitical” dimension and impact⁵¹, it should seek partnerships with organisations that already have global outreach and credibility, like UNESCO, and acknowledge sport, across all relevant services (EEAS, DEVCO, NEAR, etc.) as an appropriate thematic for such partnerships.
- The European Union should step up project-based cooperation with UNESCO, explicitly linked to sports through strong reference to the Kazan Action Plan and the Social Development Goals. It should do so especially through engagement with the MINEPS and CIGEPS instruments (see section 2.1).
- The European Union should include sports-related issues of geopolitical and diplomatic nature in its Horizon 2020 research programmes, asking applicants to seek avenues for cooperation with UNESCO as partner or associate project partner.

3.2. Relations with the Council of Europe

As one of the experts interviewed for this report put it: the relations between the EU and the Council of Europe seem to be characterised by a certain “power struggle”⁵². This does not mean that individuals on either side are moved by distrust or misgivings. Institutions are inevitably zealous guardians of their prerogatives and sharing what is perceived as a tool of influence does not come naturally to individual actors. It is no surprise that, according to another interviewee, the road to better cooperation is paved with “memorandums that get stuck in the details”.⁵³

The first step to overcome these hurdles is a stronger commitment to transparent communication and mutual consultation.

⁴⁹ Interview with an official, March 2020.

⁵⁰ Interview with an official, January 2020.

⁵¹ As announced by President Von der Leyen in November 2019. See the analyses by Strahinja Subotić for the CEP (<https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/a-geopolitical-commission/>), Mark Leonard for the ECFR (https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_makings_of_a_geopolitical_european_commission), or Sven Biscop for the Egmont Institute (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/a-geopolitical-european-commission-a-powerful-strategy/>).

⁵² Interview with an official, February 2020.

⁵³ Interview with an official, March 2020.

Recommendations:

- EU member states should make sure the Commission is systematically invited to meetings working on sport-related conventions proposed by the Council of Europe, such as the Anti-Doping Convention, or other major sports-related documents. While member-states representatives change over time, the Commission could provide the necessary continuity in such collaborations.
- Cooperation between the EU and the Council of Europe on sports-related issues should be taken to a higher level. Once established as a desirable practice leading to mutually beneficial outcomes on the level of the general directors, cooperation is more likely to become a habit on all levels of the respective institutions.
- The EU should pro-actively approach the Council of Europe with the suggestion of joint funding activities, for projects or actions on major issues advocated by the CoE, which happen to overlap perfectly with values and standards promoted by the European Union itself.

4. Conclusion: Sport Diplomacy beyond the Nation-State

The national vs. the supranational agenda

The sports diplomacy literature remains, despite the widening of the concept to include the myriad of non-state sporting actors, firmly anchored in the (soft) power logic of the traditional nation-state. The vast majority of the case studies of successful sport diplomacy actions that are related and analysed by contemporary scholarship make sense on the national level and are hardly applicable beyond.

This predominance of the national perspective remains, as Stuart Murray observes with lucidity, “one of the shortcomings of public sports diplomacy”⁵⁴. As a matter of fact, “soft power overtures built around sports diplomacy still, no matter how honeyed, or sweetly put, cannot hide the realist, hard power character of a nation state.”⁵⁵

If sport is about sharing, national sport diplomacy initiatives are, at the end of the day, about obtaining and preserving one’s own soft power resources. This may well be where a supra-national actor like the European Union has a competitive edge. Representing, by definition, a large number of member-states, and intervening on their behalf, rather than in competition with them, significantly reduces the “self-interest component” and enhances credibility in the promotion of fundamental normative commitments to specific values.

As one of the diplomacy scholars interviewed for this report observed, EU diplomacy is already taking advantage from “not being a state”: “The EU can go places where member-states can’t. It is easier for the EU, rather than a single state, to take the ‘human rights blame’. The EU is less vulnerable, it does not have the same historical record, its initiatives are untainted by individual interest”. According to the expert, member-states recognise this: “This is when the European Union brings them an added value.”⁵⁶ It is obvious that sport seems to fit perfectly into this pattern.

The emergence of sectoral diplomacy

This being said, in their need for justification, non-state sporting actors and academics of sport diplomacy have a tendency to oversell its potential. Some of them, eager to highlight its potential impact, find themselves in what Laurence Cooley calls a “rhetorical entrapment”⁵⁷. For the time being, it is no doubt more reasonable to agree with Simon Rofe, who reminds us to “be careful not to over-emphasize the role of sport in international diplomacy”, which finds itself still “on the margins of international relations.”⁵⁸

According to several experts, one of the reasons for the gap between the enthusiasm of the sport diplomacy promoters in civil society or academia and the hesitation with which it is embraced by many professional diplomats may be found in the practice of diplomacy itself, shaped by a long tradition that has produced deeply anchored behaviour and perception patterns.

⁵⁴ Murray (2018), p. 118.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Interview with a diplomacy scholar, May 2020.

⁵⁷ Laurence Cooley, “The governance of sport in deeply divided societies: actors and institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus and Northern Ireland”, in: Simon Rofe (2018), p. 13-33.

⁵⁸ Rofe (2018), p. 258.

Such institutional inertia notwithstanding, the hour of the untapped potential of sport diplomacy may come sooner than many think. According to another foreign policy expert, it is important for all diplomatic actors to realise that “the future of diplomacy will be characterised by specialisation rather than generalisation”.⁵⁹ In what Stuart Murray calls “the digital, plural and public twenty-first century”⁶⁰, actors will have to identify sectors in which to specialise, and for some of them, sport diplomacy is no doubt a very promising sectoral focus.⁶¹

Both UNESCO and the Council of Europe, which this report has identified as “natural” partners of the EU in sport diplomacy, are likely to be under similar pressure to identify key sectors on which to concentrate their resources. Like all big institutions with a significant history, “they are trying to do too much, too widely, and have trouble getting rid of activities or themes”, as one expert put it. In the future, “each of their activities will need a unique selling point, which is currently not the case”.⁶²

Cooperation with the European Union in the field of sport diplomacy would have the potential to enable UNESCO and the Council of Europe to sharpen their profile. It would at the same time result in mutually beneficial outcomes for each organisation involved. While the geographical outreach and diplomatic constraints of these three organisations differ, there is a massive overlap both in terms of fundamental values and in the perception of the nature and social role of sport. To a neutral observer, this can only appear as a very promising starting point.

Making the best possible use of these opportunities does, however, require a certain change of organisational culture in two areas. On the one hand, there needs to be a more widespread recognition among diplomats of sport’s potential in foreign policy; and on the other hand, there needs to be a clear commitment in the organisations concerned to an attitude of institutional complementarity rather than competition. The time is ripe for both.

What is required on the side of sports activists, think-tanks, and academics, is perhaps simply a good dose of patience. Institutional inertia is a powerful force, and changing attitudes takes time. The High-Level Group submitted its recommendation less than five years ago, and there have already been some modest, but notable advances. It will be important to keep sports diplomacy on the agenda. Even a modest momentum is a momentum.

⁵⁹ Interview with a foreign policy expert, June 2020.

⁶⁰ Murray (2018), p. 96.

⁶¹ For the theorisation of “sectoral diplomacy”, see Chad Damro, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Simon Schunz (eds.), *The European Union’s Evolving External Engagement: Towards New Sectoral Diplomacies?* Routledge, 2017.

⁶² Interview with a foreign policy expert, June 2020.