

The Roles of Judo And Football in Promoting Kosovo's Statehood in the International Arena


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Abstract: This research focuses on the role the sports of judo and football have in promoting Kosovo's statehood in the international arena. Through this research, I will analyze the challenges Kosovo has with regard to sports and show the opportunities Kosovo has in its international promotion of statehood, in which sports diplomacy plays a very important role. Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 but has yet to become a member of the United Nations. Since it became a part of international sports organizations, it has played against countries that do not recognize its independence. Kosovo uses sports to gain recognition to some extent, with the sport that has most influenced its international promotion being judo due mainly to the Olympic medals that Kosovo won and the fuss this created in the international media. Still, other sports such as football have also had a positive impact. The sport matches the Republic of Kosovo has held in countries and against countries that do not recognize its independence have had great importance in promoting Kosovo's statehood because the audiences in these countries recognize Kosovo.

Keywords: sports diplomacy, judo, football, Kosovo, international promotion

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Introduction

The Republic of Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008 and has since gained sympathy from other countries. Kosovo has also been recognized by foreign audiences to a certain extent when Kosovar athletes became the focus of international media headlines after their successes in sports such as judo and football. Kosovo's membership in sports organizations such as the International Olympic Committee, FIFA (World Football Federation), and UEFA (European Football Federation) in some form has provided a kind of symbolic pressure on states to recognize Kosovo's independence.

Although sports are meant to be removed from politics, they have contributed to promoting Kosovo's statehood. Serbia has tended to not allow Kosovo to apply to the UEFA because it is not a member of the United Nations (UN), but once Kosovar sports journalists pointed out that sport is removed from politics, Kosovo's application to UEFA was accepted. The sports that have promoted Kosovo's statehood the most are judo and football.

With regard to judo, Kosovar athletes have managed to win Olympic gold medals and other medals in sports events held in countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence, such as the Russian Federation. The judo athlete Majlinda Kelmendi won first place in a sports competition in Kazan, Russia, which raised the Kosovo national flag in a country that strongly opposes Kosovo's statehood. The Russian Federation made attempts to block Kosovo from participating in judo sporting events held in Russia, but these attempts were unsuccessful.

With regard to football, Spain did not want to play against Kosovo with the latter's symbols, but this initiative was also unsuccessful due to FIFA's intervention. Other blockades from states that have not recognized Kosovo's independence have come from Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. Athletes who have become subject to blockades have come from such sports as handball, basketball, and boxing. However, even these blockades somewhat contributed to promoting Kosovo due to being mentioned in the reports of influential media companies such as Deutsche Welle. Sports diplomacy has had a very positive impact on promoting Kosovo's statehood.

This research is based on secondary data and addresses the research question of what role sports have had in promoting Kosovo's statehood in the international arena. The research uses news and journal articles for data collection and analysis. I selected certain international media companies that have written about Kosovo for the analysis due to their international reputations. The importance of the article stands in the analysis it brings to the situation with regard to sports in Kosovo and its importance for Kosovo's international position, and the study recommends that the Kosovo government make more investments in sports. This research was conducted between March-December 2022.

Soft Power

Soft power is a term that is used to describe power structures that exist apart from economic and military power in international relations. Soft power is the ability to get what a state wants through attraction and persuasion rather than from any tangible form of threat. States can use public diplomacy to attract others (Nye, 2011 p. 31) in terms of such things as a country's culture, policies, and ideals. Figuratively, the difference between soft and hard power is the same as the difference between a carrot and a stick with a country spreading its influence based on material items (hard power) or a variety of resources (soft power). The forms in which soft power is used to spread influence include such things as public diplomacy, information, and philanthropy (Rotham, 2011 p. 50).

In principle, the clear difference between soft and hard power can be explained in terms of how they operate. Soft power is more indirect; it is not coercive and uses a variety of policies and actions that bring nations together in terms of endearing each other. Hard power is coercive, direct, and straightforward. Countries use hard power (i.e., force) and tangible power resources to achieve their goals. The use of soft power makes countries do something voluntarily, and its processes involve fewer conflicts of interest (Gallarotti, 2011 p. 28)

Sports diplomacy

Since the 20th century, sports have played political and diplomatic roles. One tennis table championship happened in 1971; it opened the way for communication between

the USA and China and was known as Ping Pong Diplomacy. Meanwhile, the 2002 FIFA World Cup helped to improve relations between host countries. Some examples where sports played a negative role involved the political boycotts of the USA and USSR in the 1980s, as well as the disqualification of South Africa while it remained under an apartheid regime (Dubinsky, 2019 p. 3).

A relationship exists between sports and diplomacy and can be divided into two categories. The first category involves governments using traditional sports as a dialogue between states. Sports serve as an instrument for sending diplomatic messages. One example of this category is how South Korea and North Korea had been represented under one flag in the 2018 Winter Olympics, which reignited their diplomatic relations. The second category involves non-traditional sports diplomacy and non-state actors being found to send a message or be represented in some way. For example, Germany aimed to get rid of negative stereotypes of its Nazi past by hiring translators for foreigners during the 2006 World Cup, thus creating a positive image of Germany (Abdi et al., 2018, pp. 2-3).

Some governments may use sports diplomacy as a tool to reduce conflict and poverty or as a tool for dialogue. Murray (2012) is an author who considers politics, diplomacy, and sports to be mixable but probably should not be mixed. Diplomacy involves dialogue and compromise that is not “covered by nationalistic fervor” (p. 577), whereas sports can be easily influenced by nationalism, with matches between opposing sides able to be seen as a short-war competition. In other words, sports can bring nationalist feelings to the table more so than diplomacy.

Kosovo’s Status as an Independent State and Sports

Kosovo is a country located in the Balkan region of Europe and declared its independence from Serbia in 2008. Kosovo did not become an immediate member of the United Nations (UN; Young, 2022). After Kosovo declared its independence, Serbia proposed a resolution to the UN Assembly that aimed to ask the International Court of Justice (ICJ) whether Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) violated international law with the original question being phrased as, “Is the unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo

in accordance with international law?" (International Court of Justice 2010). In 2010, ICJ came up with an opinion answering the question raised by the UN General Assembly. ICJ (2010) declared Kosovo's UDI to not violate international law nor Resolution 1244/1999; ICJ also stated that Kosovo's independence had not occurred due to the efforts of "provisional institutions" because those who had declared the independence represented the people of Kosovo and, as such, had been democratically elected. Among the countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, and Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora- Republic of Kosovo, 2022).

Different reasons exist as to why these countries do not recognize Kosovo's independence. Serbia and Russia strongly oppose Kosovo's independence due to the brotherly relations these states have with one another, with Serbia considering Kosovo part of its territory (Ozturk, 2022). Regarding the five EU member states of Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, the issue is not Kosovo itself, but the local politics of entities within these states that seek secession or more autonomy, In the case of Spain, Catalonia seeks independence; in Cyprus, the issue is the de facto state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, while Greece stands with Cyprus for the same reason; and in Romania and Slovakia, the issue is the presence of large Hungarian ethnic groups calling for autonomy (Turp-Balazs, 2021). Regarding Ukraine and Georgia, Ukraine considers "Kosovo [to have] violated international law and the territorial integrity of a UN member state" (Argumentum, 2022), with Georgia having taken a similar approach. Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili pointed out that Georgia respects the principle of inviolability of borders (B92, 2017). As for Bosnia and Herzegovina, it does not recognize Kosovo's independence amid fears of the request for secession from Republika Srpska, which is an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as one of the three members of the Presidency of Bosnia, Milorad Dodik, considering Kosovo to have violated the territorial integrity of Serbia (European Western Balkans, 2020).

After the Kosovo War ended, sports policies focused on building a national sports system. This has included infrastructure development, as well as political elements such as international recognition and Kosovo's cooperation with the international community. Among other things, Kosovar sports have aimed to build peace among the ethnic communities in Kosovo (Giulianotti et al., 2016, p. 7). The sports infrastructure is not that developed, at least not at fulfilling international criteria, and this has been

an obstacle for children's professional development in all kinds of sports. Most of the sports in Kosovo operate as non-governmental organizations, clubs, associations, or sports federations, which means these structures hold a kind of autonomy that is differentiated from politics, which somehow fulfills the international criteria of neutrality toward politics. Kosovo has 35 registered sports federations and 867 sports clubs (Alaj et al., 2018, pp. 45-46).

The Role of Judo in Kosovo's International Promotion

The judoka Majlinda Kelmendi put Kosovo in international newspapers such as *Euronews* after her success at the London 2012 Olympic Games. In addition to *Euronews*, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) newspaper has also often written about Majlinda Kelmendi. Various reporters visited the athlete's house and reported on her and the Republic of Kosovo. *The Guardian* newspaper also wrote about how Majlinda Kelmendi was not allowed to represent the Republic of Kosovo because Kosovo was not a member of the International Olympic Committee. Majlinda Kelmendi stated, "The fight for recognition continues", referring to the International Olympic Committee's recognition of Kosovo (Saliu, et al., 2022 pp. 69-72). Other than the World Championship in Chelyabinsk in 2014 and the European Judo Championship, in Russia in 2016, Kosovo was also represented with all its state symbols in the non-recognizing state of Brazil, for the 2016 Judo World Championships (Rexhepi, et al., 2021 pp. 31-32).

During the 2016 European Judo Championship, the Russian hosts refused to recognize Kosovo's national status. However, these efforts were unsuccessful, as the Kosovo flag was raised up during Majlinda Kelmendi's victory ceremony after she took first place and won the gold medal in that sports competition (Giulianotti et al., 2016, p. 10). Majlinda Kelmendi has been named Kosovo's ambassador due to how she has promoted and created a positive image for Kosovo. The reason why she is considered a dignified diplomat is because of the medals she has won in countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence and oppose Kosovo's international subjectivity (Rexhepi, et al., 2021 pp. 31-32).

Other judokas who have won various medals for Kosovo in international competitions are Nora Gjakova and Distria Krasniqi, who have both played important roles in the

internationalization of Kosovo's statehood through sports and by creating a positive image of Kosovo (Rexhepi, et al., 2021 pp. 31-32). During the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, these two Judokas won two gold medals for Kosovo (Bytyçi, et al., 2021), which the newspaper *Politico* (Hajdari, 2021) considered as "having gained [Kosovo] international recognition ... at the Olympics". Another important victory for Kosovo involved Distria Krasniqi's gold medal victory in the Judo Grand Slam 2022 in Tbilisi, Georgia (Euronews-Albania, 2022).

The Role of Football in Promoting Kosovo's Statehood

Kosovo's memberships in FIFA and UEFA are seen as part of Kosovo's strategy to be recognized internationally through the use of soft power. Kosovo's membership in these sports organizations has also occurred as a form of symbolic pressure on states to get them to recognize Kosovo's independence (Brentin & Tregoures, 2016).

Media companies such as BBC, CNN, and *The Guardian*, wrote articles when Kosovo became a member of FIFA and UEFA, returning international attention to Kosovo. Apart from the media aspects, Kosovo is also known for having hosted many football matches (Rexhepi & Sahiti, 2021 p. 32). Kosovo initially had difficulty joining UEFA, as the latter only considered UN member states to be eligible to join UEFA. However, journalists from Kosovo pointed out that politics should be removed from sports and that Kosovo being required to be a UN member state in order to become a UEFA member was political (Giulianotti et al., 2016, p. 9).

Kosovo was even placed in the world's attention with the success of footballers from Kosovo. Footballer Xherdan Shaqiri was born in Kosovo but had emigrated to Switzerland and raised his team Bayern's cup in the finals of the European Champions cup in 2013 while covered with the Kosovar flag. This action caused a worldwide media frenzy, putting Kosovo back in the world's attention. Apart from Xherdan Shaqiri, other footballers have played on respected European, Australian, and even Chinese teams who also promoted their country of origin (Saliu & Lljunji, 2022 p. 72).

The successes of Kosovar football have not stopped. An important chronicle in 2019 from the prestigious British media company, the BBC, showed the success the Kosovo football team had had with their 15 games win streak. In addition, the BBC has written

other important articles about the Republic of Kosovo, its history of independence, and Kosovar athletes during the time of the former Yugoslavia, such as the Kosovar football icon Fadil Vokrri. Such sports news from highly reputable media organizations brought international attention to Kosovo (Jennings, 2019). Situation and important cases for promoting its statehood have involved Kosovo's football matches with countries that do not recognize its independence.

In March 2021, the Kosovo football team played against Spain to qualify for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. Spain is also one of the countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence. Spain even opposes its independence and stated that it would not play against Kosovo if the latter were represented by a flag or symbols displaying the statehood of Kosovo. However, FIFA forced Spain to play, and the Spanish media considered this case a diplomatic victory for Kosovo (Rexhepi & Sahiti, 2021 p. 32).

One important victory for Kosovo was against the Cyprus football team, with a final score of 2-0 on June 2, 2022 (BBC, 2022). Kosovo's matches with countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence are extremely important for Kosovo because Kosovo is presented to international audiences at these matches. A game on June 5, 2022 in Prishtina also forced Greece's national football team to face Kosovo's national football team (UEFA, 2022). On September 27, 2022, Kosovo won 5-1 against the non-recognizing state of Cyprus (Eurosport, 2022).

Racial slurs may occur in sporting events and give a negative international image, but this has not been the case for Kosovo. The prestigious British media tabloid, the *Daily Mail*, wrote an article about Kosovo football after Kosovo had played a match against England for the Euro 2020 qualifiers. The English fans were warmly welcomed in Kosovo, despite their bad experiences in countries such as Montenegro and Bulgaria where they had encountered racism (Shergold, 2019).

Kosovo's Internationalization Through Other Forms

Other forms have occurred through which Kosovo has been internationalized, such as the international media attention it has received due to sports. By this, the study emphasized the international media attention given to Kosovo as a result of the obstacles Kosovar athletes participating in various sporting events had encountered in countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

In 2016 political obstacles occurred for sports journalists trying to obtain visas to enter Ukraine, when Kosovo was competing in handball tournaments. Although Kosovo was part of this sports competition, sports journalists had been denied entry to Ukraine for political reasons (Giulianotti et al., 2016, p. 10). Then regarding basketball, in 2018, the Kosovar U-16 basketball players' visa issuance was delayed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, putting young Kosovar basketball players at risk of not being able to participate in the European tournament (Isufi, 2018). Kosovar athletes even encountered obstacles with the sports tournaments held in the state of Serbia. Kosovar boxers were barred from entering Serbia once the athletes spotted wearing Kosovo state symbols (Cerkini, 2021).

Kosovar athletes have managed to raise the flag of Kosovo in large countries such as Russia and Brazil that do not recognize Kosovo's independence causing Kosovo to get promoted in the audiences of these countries, not through any political channel of diplomacy such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but through sports instead (Konushevcic, 2021).

Conclusion

Based on the above data, I can conclude that Kosovar sports and athletes have played important roles in promoting the Republic of Kosovo's statehood. I was able to answer the research question of what role sports have had in promoting Kosovo's statehood in the international arena based on the collected data, with the answer being that sports are an activity that have promoted Kosovo in countries that do not recognize its independence.

Several countries do not recognize Kosovo's independence, and some even strongly oppose it, but Kosovo has managed to appear with its anthem, flag, and state symbols in these countries, all thanks to the sports of judo and football.

Some examples of states that do not recognize Kosovo's independence but are places where Kosovo has managed to raise its flag or use its state symbols include the Russian Federation, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Serbia, and Georgia while other countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence but have played against Kosovo with all its state symbols include Greece and Cyprus.

Countries such as the Russian Federation, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine have tried to prevent Kosovar athletes and/or Kosovar sports journalists from entering their state territories. Despite the obstacles to entering state territories or being represented by state symbols, Kosovo has managed to overcome these. For example, Spain's attempt to not play against the Republic of Kosovo during the qualifications for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 failed due to FIFA's intervention.

The main sports that have made Kosovo the subject of the globally influential media are mainly the sports of judo and football. Meanwhile, other sports such as basketball, handball, and boxing have also made Kosovo a media topic due to the obstacles placed on Kosovar athletes by states that are opposed to Kosovo's statehood. In addition to the successes of Kosovar athletes playing for Kosovo, Kosovo has also been promoted by Kosovar athletes playing for other European teams. Footballers have made Kosovo the main topic of the world media, such as Xherdan Shaqiri when he appeared covered in the Kosovo flag upon his team winning an important football championship. The role of sports diplomacy in promoting Kosovo's statehood is vital for its international promotion.

Kosovo's obstacles in sports involve technical and political issues that Kosovar athletes have faced when dealing with countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence. In all cases where data was able to be collected, the study has concluded that Kosovo has managed to eliminate these obstacles. The presence of Kosovo in sports events in countries that do not recognize its independence and the matches that Kosovo plays with these countries continue to be of great importance because Kosovo's statehood is presented to these international audiences. While I consider just this presence to have been of great importance when adding the times that Kosovo won a sporting event in these countries or against these countries. Kosovo is also seen not just to have gained recognition but to have also created a good image. Recommendations regarding how to further the international promotion of the Republic of Kosovo through the sports of judo and football include the following:

- The Kosovo government should financially invest in sports, in particular football and judo, and should also create an infrastructure for this and develop new staff.
- Friendly international football matches should be promoted, especially with countries that do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

- A portion of the state budget should be added just for the international promotion of Kosovo and its successes in the sports of judo and football.
- Judokas should be interviewed more and footballers promoted more in Kosovo during international sporting events.
- Social networks should be used and promotions carried out using hashtags with regard to Kosovo, especially for sporting events involving football and judo.
- Kosovar athletes who contribute to the international promotion of Kosovo should be given awards.

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