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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: Sport diplomacy: Promoting Europe's Interests and Values in the World
- *Policy debate*

Delegations will find attached a background paper on "Sport Diplomacy: Promoting Europe's Interests and Values in the World", as prepared by the Presidency in light of consultations with delegations.

The Committee of Permanent Representatives is invited to submit this background paper to the Council (EYCS – Brussels, 17-18 May 2021) with a view to the policy debate of Sport Ministers to be held on 18 May 2021.

Sport Diplomacy: Promoting Europe’s Interests and Values in the World

- Presidency background paper for the policy debate of Sport Ministers -

1. BACKGROUND

Sport is increasingly being found in the diplomatic toolkits of the EU’s global counterparts. The US and China are ahead of the game having already established sport diplomacy strategies. Despite a number of EU member states being active in this field, collectively, the EU is only just taking its first steps. Now is the time for the EU to consider catching up by harnessing the global appeal of sport to strengthen the effectiveness and impact of its foreign policy thereby helping promote European interests and values on the global stage.¹

2. WHAT IS SPORT DIPLOMACY?

‘Traditional’ sport diplomacy is a familiar concept. For many years, the state has employed sport to amplify foreign policy messages, particularly as a means of softening relations between estranged states or to signal displeasure at state behaviour.² These ‘traditional’ sport diplomacy actions have tended to be “sporadic, opportunistic and, arguably, somewhat clumsy” and the results have been difficult to determine.³ Accordingly, in recent years some states have attempted to act in a more strategic and nuanced manner, and this has modernised sport diplomacy.

¹ A goal expressed by the European Council in ‘A New Strategic Agenda for the EU, 2019-24’: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/#group-EU-in-the-world-zh3uey0ErW>

² The ‘ping-pong’ inspired rapprochement between President Nixon and Chairman Mao in 1972 and the use of sporting boycotts are two such examples.

³ Murray, S. (2018), *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, Routledge, p.61

‘Modern’ sport diplomacy refers to the more regular and strategic use of sport to achieve external relations objectives. It draws in a wider range of actors beyond the traditional diplomat and politician including amateur and professional sportspersons (‘diplomats in tracksuits’), sports clubs, governing bodies and civil society actors. It builds long-term mutually beneficial partnerships with third countries and societies, particularly where relations have become estranged. Modern sport diplomacy extends the appeal of a nation’s people and culture to third countries through the cultivation of people-to-people links with grassroots initiatives becoming increasingly prominent.⁴

‘Sport-as-diplomacy’ is a third dimension. It refers to situations in which sports bodies harness the appeal of sport as a means of pursuing their interests in the international arena.⁵ For example, through the allocation of mega-events, sports bodies can leverage influence in national capitals and seek assurances, sometimes even enshrined in law, about the protection of key interests such as the autonomy and specificity of sport.

3. EU SPORT DIPLOMACY: FINDING ITS WAY IN THE EU EXTERNAL ACTION

Article 165 TFEU endowed the EU with a limited competence in the field of sport, but it provided that, ‘*The Union shall foster co-operation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the field of sport*’. Taking this forward, in 2015, the European Commission established a High-Level Group (HLG) on Sport Diplomacy.⁶

⁴ See for example the sport diplomacy strategies of the US and Australia. For European examples, see three Erasmus+ projects: *Grassroots Sport Diplomacy* (2018-19), *Promoting a Strategic Approach to EU Sport Diplomacy* (2019-21) and *Towards an EU Sport Diplomacy* (2020-21).

⁵ See for example Beacom, A. (2012), *International Diplomacy and the Olympic Movement: The New Mediators*, Palgrave, p.244.

⁶ European Commission (2016), High Level Group on Sport Diplomacy, June, accessed at: http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/sport/policy/cooperation/documents/290616-hlg-sd-final-report_en.pdf

Since then, the EU has taken its first few strategic steps including adopting inter alia Council Conclusions on *Sport Diplomacy* (2016) and prioritizing sport diplomacy in consecutive *EU Work Plans for Sport*. These have acted as the basis for the EU taking its first practical steps into sport diplomacy as witnessed by the integration of sport into the EU-China High Level People to People Dialogue (2017) and the launch of the EU-Japan Policy Dialogue on Education, Youth and Sport (2018).

Further steps have been taken to facilitate the delivery of EU sport diplomacy. The Erasmus+ programme is the embodiment of EU ‘soft power’, yet in order for the EU to engage with third countries through sport, technical adjustments to that programme were required. Accordingly, in 2018, the Erasmus+ funding criteria was amended in order to facilitate participation from third countries. The European Week of Sport was opened to participation of Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership states and in 2018, a call for proposals on exchanges and mobility in sport presented a tool for international co-operation initiatives with the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and with countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Erasmus+ not only generates a much-needed evidence base on the efficacy of EU sport diplomacy, it also funds sport diplomacy in action.⁷

4. EU ADDED VALUE

It must be recalled that Articles 6 and 165 TFEU endow the EU with a competence in sport to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States. The Member States and the relevant sports bodies retain the primary competence for sport, and it is apparent that Member States have already built extensive and long-lasting social, cultural, and sporting ties with many third countries across the globe.

⁷ See for example, ECORYS (2018), *Sport Diplomacy: Identifying Good Practices*, Report for the European Commission.

The EU can add value to these Member State actions through so-called ‘smart complementarity’, whilst respecting the principle of subsidiarity. The EU and the Member States share common values and objectives, with EU action being able to complement and reinforce national sport diplomacy strategies and give such strategies global reach and impact in international organisations. Insofar as some national sport diplomacy strategies are young and lack experience, the EU and its Member States can share best practices, pool resources, and give a greater voice and impact to these developing strategies. Equally, the EU retains a richness of diversity, and just as EU cultural diplomacy promotes the EU’s cultural diversity, so sport diplomacy can do likewise.⁸

5. EU INSTRUMENTS AND PARTNERS

The Union possesses strong instruments that can facilitate sport diplomacy. In recent years the European Commission has fostered strong relations with international sports bodies and has made effective use of instruments such as structured dialogue. In relation to third country co-operation, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU Delegations and Offices around the world are ideally placed to facilitate sport diplomacy initiatives, but scope remains for more strategic engagement with sport diplomacy, for instance through the possible creation of a Sport Diplomacy Platform and an enhanced role for EU Delegations in this area.⁹ Elsewhere, the EU has leverage with third countries via other formal mechanisms, including within the framework of Accession, Association, Co-operation and Neighbourhood agreements. The EU can also exert influence in, and foster cooperation with, international organisations active in the field of sport, including the international sport federations, the Council of Europe, and the UN system. Sport can play a part in advancing common interests in the area of human rights and achieving the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁰

⁸ For EU cultural diplomacy see: <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policies/international-cultural-relations>

⁹ See for example the Cultural Relations Platform: <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu>

¹⁰ See paragraph 37 of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the contribution sport can make to the achievement of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): https://www.un.org/sport/sites/www.un.org.sport/files/ckfiles/files/Sport_for_SDGs_finalversion9.pdf

6. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

At the policy debate, the Ministers are kindly invited to give their reactions (interventions should be limited to a maximum of three minutes) to the following questions:

1. Does the EU cultural and educational diplomacy offer a blueprint for the development of an EU sport diplomacy strategy? What are in your view the potential benefits of an EU sport diplomacy strategy?
 2. What should be the next steps to Member States and EU to foster an EU sport diplomacy strategy?
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