

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND SPORTS RELATIONS: THE CASE OF THE SOVIETS AND YUGOSLAVIA

(Kamu Diplomasisi, Stratejik İletişim ve Spor İlişkisi: Sovyetler ve Yugoslavya Örneği)

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Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article

Geliş Tarihi/Submission Date: 04.08.2025

Kabul Tarihi/Acceptance Date: 08.03.2026

DOI: 10.53507/akademikdusunce.1758437

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of public diplomacy and sports diplomacy, emphasizing their significance as instruments of cultural and ideological influence in contemporary international relations. Employing comparative-historical analysis, the research delves into the distinctive trajectories of sports diplomacy in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, illustrating how both countries strategically integrated sports into their broader frameworks of strategic communication to project ideological narratives, cultivate domestic cohesion, and engage with the international community. Public diplomacy, grounded in the concept of soft power, operates as part of a larger strategic communication strategy aimed at influencing international audiences through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Sports diplomacy extends these principles by leveraging the universal language of sports to foster international relationships, promote reconciliation, and enhance national prestige. The study demonstrates that the Soviet Union employed sports to showcase the superiority of the socialist system through coordinated communication efforts while Yugoslavia used sports diplomacy to navigate its non-aligned status, balancing internal diversity with external partnerships.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, Sport Diplomacy, Sports, USSR, Yugoslavia, Strategic Communication

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, kamu diplomasisi ve spor diplomasisinin kesişimini inceleyerek, bu alanların modern uluslararası ilişkilerde kültürel ve ideolojik etki araçları olarak taşıdığı önemi vurgulamaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı-tarihsel analiz yöntemine dayanan araştırma, Sovyetler Birliği ve Yugoslavya'da spor diplomasisinin birbirinden farklı gelişim yollarını ve bu ülkelerin sporu stratejik iletişim çerçevesinde nasıl diplomatik bir araç olarak kullandıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Yumuşak güç kavramına dayanan kamu diplomasisi, stratejik iletişim stratejilerinin temel bir bileşeni olarak, uluslararası hedef kitleleri çekicilik ve ikna yoluyla etkilemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Spor diplomasisi ise, bu yaklaşımın bir uzantısı olarak, sporun evrensel dili üzerinden ilişkiler inşa etmekte, uzlaşmayı teşvik etmekte ve ulusal prestiji artırmaktadır. Araştırma, Sovyetler Birliği'nin spor aracılığıyla sosyalist sisteminin üstünlüğünü öne çıkardığını, Yugoslavya'nın ise tarafsız ve çok kültürlü yapısı içinde sporu hem iç bütünlüğü hem de dış ilişkileri dengelemek için stratejik olarak kullandığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kamu Diplomasisi, Spor Diplomasisi, Spor, SSCB, Yugoslavya, Stratejik İletişim

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***Atıf/Cite:** Yılmaz, Ö. (2026). Public Diplomacy, Strategic Communication and Sports Relations: The Case of the Soviets and Yugoslavia. *Akademik Düşünce Dergisi*, 13, 23-48, Doi: 10.53507/akademikdusunce.1758437.

Introduction

Diplomacy, as the management of change, has demonstrated remarkable adaptability over centuries, evolving alongside shifts in the structure of international society. Modern diplomatic practice now extends beyond managing state-to-state relations, increasingly incorporating the complexities of transnational interactions. Civil society in host countries plays an unprecedented role in diplomatic engagement, marking a significant departure from traditional practices. The visibility of ordinary individuals in diplomacy has grown substantially, especially within public diplomacy and consular relations. The latter, focusing on the well-being of citizens abroad, has become a crucial area for foreign ministries, significantly influencing their reputation domestically. Public diplomacy, far from being a fleeting trend, has emerged as a cornerstone of contemporary international relations. Although some bilateral relationships still lack robust public engagement, the global expansion of public diplomacy reflects its growing significance (Melissen, 2005: 23-24).

In recent decades, this expansion has increasingly been interpreted through the framework of strategic communication, a concept that emphasizes the deliberate, purposive, and integrated management of communication activities to achieve defined objectives. Within this paradigm, public diplomacy is no longer viewed as a loosely organized set of activities, but as a core element of a state's strategic communication infrastructure—one that employs targeted messaging, audience analysis, and multi-channel coordination to shape international perceptions and advance diplomatic goals.

The evolution of public and sports diplomacy underscores the adaptability of diplomatic practices in navigating the complexities of modern international relations. Public diplomacy leverages soft power to shape international perceptions and build relationships while sports diplomacy integrates these principles into a universal language of cultural exchange. Approaching these practices as components of strategic communication allows for a deeper understanding of the ways in which states and societies utilize carefully crafted, context-sensitive messaging to achieve strategic objectives, influence global narratives, and respond to shifting power dynamics. This dual focus allows the study to delve into the nuanced ways in which states and societies have utilized these diplomatic tools to achieve strategic objectives, influence global narratives, and respond to the shifting dynamics of global power structures.

Methodology

This study employs comparative-historical analysis as its primary research method. This approach is well established in historical sociology and labour studies, particularly as a critique of traditional analyses that seek to explain working-class formation through a single, linear, and universal model. Such “grand narrative” frameworks tend to treat divergent historical trajectories as anomalies or deviations rather than as analytically meaningful outcomes. In contrast, the comparative-historical literature emphasizes variation, contingency, and context, arguing that similar structural processes-such as proletarianization or state-led modernization-may generate markedly different political, cultural, and institutional results depending on historical and geopolitical conditions (Silver, 2009: 46).

Methodologically, this literature prioritizes a disaggregation strategy over aggregation and generalization. Rather than searching for uniform patterns across cases, comparative-historical analysis focuses on identifying how and why cases diverge, thereby foregrounding the complexity and heterogeneity of historical experiences. Central to this approach is what Silver terms a “deviation detection” strategy, which seeks to explain divergent outcomes not as exceptions to a dominant model, but as outcomes produced by distinct configurations of power, ideology, and institutional arrangements.

Building on this methodological framework, the present study situates public diplomacy and sports diplomacy within the broader literature on strategic communication and state-led cultural influence. Existing scholarship on public diplomacy highlights a shift away from narrowly state-centric diplomatic practices toward forms of influence that actively engage non-state actors, mass publics, and transnational audiences. Sports diplomacy occupies a particularly revealing position within this literature, as it operates simultaneously at domestic and international levels, combining symbolic representation, popular culture, and ideological signaling.

Using a comparative-historical perspective, the article examines the trajectories of sports diplomacy in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union as two distinct but structurally comparable cases. Both states mobilized sport as a tool of public diplomacy, yet they did so under markedly different political and geopolitical conditions. Yugoslavia employed sport primarily to articulate a non-aligned identity and to foster internal cohesion within a multiethnic federal structure. By contrast, the Soviet Union, as a Cold War superpower engaged in systemic

ideological rivalry with the West, instrumentalized sport as a central component of its global competition and ideological projection.

Through this comparative analysis, the study demonstrates that sport functioned not merely as a cultural arena or a site of symbolic competition, but as a strategically designed instrument of communication serving both internal integration and external influence. The comparative-historical method thus enables the article to move beyond generalized accounts of sports diplomacy and to show how similar diplomatic practices were shaped by-and responded to-different historical contexts, state identities, and strategic objectives.

1. Public Diplomacy and Communication Studies

Diplomacy is conceptualized as the array of mechanisms, excluding warfare, employed by an international actor to navigate and influence the international environment. In contemporary settings, the term "international actor" encompasses not only states but also multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, terrorist groups, stateless paramilitary organizations, and other global players. Traditional diplomacy refers to efforts by such actors to shape the international environment through direct engagement with other international entities. Public diplomacy, on the other hand, entails managing the international environment by engaging directly with the foreign public, emphasizing dialogue and influencing beyond state-level interactions (Cull, 2009: 12).

1.1. Soft Power

The concept of soft power is foundational to understanding public diplomacy, as it highlights the ability to influence and shapes preferences through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Joseph Nye, who coined the term, defines soft power as the capacity to achieve objectives through appeal and persuasion by leveraging culture, political values, and foreign policies that resonate positively with others. This contrasts with hard power, which relies on military or economic force (Snow, 2020: 3-4).

Soft power is defined as the ability of an actor to influence others and achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. Unlike hard power, which relies on military or economic might to compel action, soft power operates by shaping preferences, fostering goodwill, and building legitimacy. This form of power arises from intangible resources such as cultural appeal, ideological alignment, and the establishment of international norms and institutions that reflect the actor's values and interests. Joseph Nye emphasizes that soft power is the most effective when a country's culture and values resonate

positively with others, encouraging them to voluntarily align their preferences. This co-optive power enables an actor to structure situations in ways that lead others to want what it wants, thus reducing resistance and the need for direct control. To give an instance, the United States has historically wielded significant soft power through its cultural exports, ideological promotion of liberal democracy, and leadership in international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization, which embody its values. Soft power has become increasingly important in a globalized and interdependent world where the costs of coercion are higher and less sustainable. The hard power remains relevant while the appeal of soft power lies in its ability to foster long-term influence and cooperation. By leveraging cultural products, ideological narratives, and institutional frameworks, states and other actors can achieve strategic goals without the economic and political costs associated with hard power tactics (Nye, 1990: 166-168).

An alternative perspective, however, approaches cultural confidence as a strategic issue in relation to a country's position in the international system. From this viewpoint, the effective projection of culture requires not only comprehensive planning and implementation across academic, cultural, and state institutions, but also the complementary use of hard power alongside soft power to ensure that a nation's voice is fully and accurately heard in global debates. Meaningful cultural influence and a coherent international discourse cannot be sustained in the absence of substantial economic and political power; without such material foundations, neither cultural confidence nor a robust global narrative architecture can be effectively constructed (Boer, 2021: 314).

Soft power, as articulated by Joseph Nye, provides the foundation for public diplomacy by leveraging a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies to influence international audiences through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Bostancıoğlu, 2023: 610). Public diplomacy functions as the operational framework through which soft power is mobilized, engaging foreign publics to shape perceptions, build mutual understanding, and promote favourable narratives about a nation. The historical development of public diplomacy is closely intertwined with earlier practices of cultural promotion and information management in international politics. To give an example, the French government used the Alliance Française to project its language and culture after the Franco-Prussian War, signalling the strategic incorporation of culture into diplomatic practice (Kocabıyık, 2019: 169-170).

Similarly, during the First World War, governments institutionalized large-scale communication campaigns aimed at foreign publics, most explicitly framed at the time as

propaganda, with the United States establishing the Committee on Public Information to influence international opinion. During the Second World War and especially throughout the Cold War, such practices expanded dramatically through international broadcasting and cultural outreach. Institutions such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty-widely recognized as central instruments of U.S. ideological communication and, in many cases, linked to intelligence and psychological warfare operations-sought not only to counter communist narratives but also to transmit American political values to audiences behind the Iron Curtain. Although these activities would later be reinterpreted within the conceptual language of public diplomacy and soft power, their contemporaneous function was commonly understood as propaganda aimed at destabilizing adversarial ideological environments and reshaping political loyalties. Following the end of the Cold War, U.S. investment in these communication instruments declined, reflecting the perception that ideological influence had become secondary to hard power. The attacks of September 11, 2001, however, renewed scholarly and policy interest in soft power and international communication, reframing earlier propaganda-oriented practices within the more dialogical and legitimacy-oriented discourse of public diplomacy. In this sense, public diplomacy can be understood not as a historical rupture but as a normative and strategic rearticulation of earlier state-sponsored international communication, translating the principles of soft power into institutionalized practices adapted to globalization and the contemporary information environment (Nye Jr., 2008: 96-98).

Public diplomacy is a multifaceted practice that relies on several key principles to achieve its objectives. At its core, it begins with listening, which involves gathering and analysing the opinions of the foreign public to shape informed and responsive policies. Genuine listening, rather than symbolic gestures, fosters trust and prevents perceptions of condescension. Equally important is the integration of public diplomacy with policymaking, ensuring that actions align with rhetoric and that foreign perspectives are considered in the development of policies. Unlike domestic propaganda, public diplomacy focuses on engaging international audiences rather than seek to impress local constituencies. Its success hinges on credibility, which is built through authenticity and transparency, avoiding politicization or covert operations that could undermine trust. In some cases, the most effective public diplomacy occurs when states empower credible third parties or local voices to communicate their message, as this approach often resonates more strongly with target audiences. Furthermore, public diplomacy is not limited to enhancing a nation's image; it can also aim to improve the broader international

environment or amplify indigenous voices within specific regions. Finally, public diplomacy is a collective effort that extends beyond governments to include citizen diplomats and grassroots exchanges, emphasizing the role of individuals and communities in shaping a nation's global reputation. Through these interconnected principles, public diplomacy seeks to build lasting relationships, foster mutual understanding, and influence global narratives (Cull, 2010: 12-15).

In recent years, the concept of strategic communication has increasingly become central to the theory and practice of public diplomacy. Strategic communication refers to the deliberate and coordinated use of communication activities, channels, and messages by international actors to achieve specific long-term goals, shape perceptions, and guide the behaviours of foreign audiences. Unlike ad-hoc or reactive communication, strategic communication involves careful planning, audience analysis, and message consistency across all platforms. In this sense, public diplomacy can be understood as a core component of strategic communication, as it relies on planned and targeted engagement to build credibility, foster trust, and advance national interests in a complex international environment (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017: 2-3). This approach places communication at the core of management and emphasizes the need for integration across public relations, political communication, marketing, and other fields, enabling organizations to influence perceptions, build legitimacy, and foster stakeholder relationships both at the national and international levels.

2. Sport Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy

Sport is significantly influenced by social developments and, at the same time, exerts a notable impact on them. In today's world, everyday life and popular culture have become inseparable from the phenomenon of sport. It plays a crucial role in the process of social reproduction, contributing to the perpetuation and transformation of societal norms and values. In this context, sport possesses ideological characteristics and maintains close ties with dominant cultural frameworks. Pierre Bourdieu (1988: 155) emphasizes that sport is not an independent universe, but a structured system of practices and consumption embedded within broader societal dynamics. It is valid to regard sports activities as a relatively autonomous field while Bourdieu points out that this field is influenced by external forces and cannot be isolated from the power structures surrounding it. Thus, sport operates as a dynamic arena where individual and collective social transformations both influence and are influenced by broader social and ideological contexts (Yılmaz, 2024: 225). Sports diplomacy is discussed in this context.

At this intersection, it is crucial to recognize that contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes public diplomacy as a form of strategic communication. Although the question of “How strategic is public diplomacy?” is rarely addressed explicitly, much of the literature implicitly assumes that strategic alignment is a precondition for effective public diplomacy. Three main positions can be identified. Some scholars treat public diplomacy and strategic communication as functionally equivalent, emphasizing their shared focus on persuasion, reputation management, and influence. Others conceptualize them as analytically distinct yet overlapping domains, arguing that public diplomacy constitutes only one communicative dimension of a broader strategic communication architecture. A third strand of scholarship explicitly situates public diplomacy as a subfield within strategic communication, in which communication is understood as a purposive, coordinated, and goal-oriented instrument of policy (Löffelholz, Auer & Srugies, 2014: 439).

This article aligns with the latter perspective. It conceptualizes public diplomacy not as an autonomous set of activities but as an integral component of strategic communication, defined by the deliberate coordination of messages, actors, and channels in pursuit of long-term political and diplomatic objectives. From this standpoint, the question is not whether public diplomacy is strategic, but how strategically it is designed and implemented. Such an approach allows sport diplomacy to be analytically integrated into a broader communication strategy, in which the symbolic and affective power of sport is systematically mobilized to shape international perceptions, manage reputational capital, and advance state interests (Güneş, 2016: 60-61).

Sport diplomacy serves as a powerful tool for fostering intercultural understanding, promoting cooperation, and mediating conflicts in international relations. International sporting events offer unique opportunities to reach both the public and political elites through the shared appeal of sport. These events can strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties by facilitating dialogue and creating symbolic spaces for engagement, as demonstrated throughout history (Göksu, 2019: 414). Prominent examples of bilateral sport diplomacy include “ping-pong diplomacy” during the Cold War, which helped re-establish communication between the United States and China in a politically tense environment, and cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan, which temporarily eased tensions and fostered goodwill (Ayverdi & Sunay, 2023: 25-26).

However, sport diplomacy is not without its risks. The infamous “Soccer War” between El Salvador and Honduras illustrates how sporting events, under certain conditions, can intensify rather than alleviate pre-existing conflicts (Chebabi, 2001: 90). At the multilateral level, international organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and FIFA play influential roles in structuring global sporting encounters and facilitating cultural exchange. Yet these institutions cannot be understood as politically neutral actors. Their governance structures, decision-making processes, and commercial partnerships are embedded in broader power relations, often reflecting Western political, economic, and normative priorities. Consequently, international competitions frequently become arenas of political contestation rather than impartial platforms of cooperation. The economic dimensions of sport diplomacy further complicate its role, as sponsorships, tourism, and commercial interests shape both the organization and the diplomatic value of major events (Trunkos & Heere, 2017: 5-6).

Sport diplomacy involves various mechanisms that facilitate trust-building, reconciliation, and anti-racism, yet its economic and commercial dimensions warrant closer examination. Hosting international sporting events often carries significant economic implications, offering opportunities for urban renewal and economic growth while simultaneously imposing substantial financial burdens on host nations. Events such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil illustrate the dual nature of these undertakings, where extensive public investment in infrastructure and event organization generated both development narratives and widespread social protests over resource allocation (Schallhorn, 2020: 603).

Moreover, the contemporary political economy of global sport is shaped less by the influence of individual corporations than by complex networks of sponsors, broadcasters, governing bodies, and host governments. While commercial actors continue to affect the organization and symbolic meaning of major events, their influence is mediated through institutional arrangements, regulatory frameworks, and transnational partnerships rather than direct control by a small number of dominant brands. At the same time, persistent problems of corruption, such as vote-buying within FIFA or controversies surrounding the selection of Olympic host cities, undermine the legitimacy of sport diplomacy and reveal how economic interests and governance structures intersect with political power. These dynamics add further layers of complexity to sport diplomacy, underscoring the need for transparency, institutional accountability, and strategic planning if long-term diplomatic and social benefits are to be realized (Nygård & Gates, 2013: 238-239).

Sport diplomacy serves as a critical mechanism of soft power, leveraging the universal appeal of sports to influence international relations and foster intercultural dialogue. The intersection of sports and public diplomacy highlights the capacity of sports to act as a tool for persuasion and attraction, aligning with Joseph Nye's definition of soft power (as cited in Tekerek & Koçak, 2024: 100-101). By utilizing sports to build relationships, enhance national image, and promote shared values, sport diplomacy becomes an effective medium for states and non-state actors to achieve their diplomatic objectives. However, the application of sport diplomacy is context-dependent, as the effectiveness of soft power mechanisms varies across cultural and geopolitical landscapes. The use of a strategic and analytical framework, as proposed in recent conceptual works, underscores the need for tailored approaches that account for the unique dynamics of each country or region. Such frameworks allow for comparative analyses that deepen theoretical understanding and practical application of sport diplomacy. A notable limitation of existing conceptual frameworks is their lack of application to specific case studies. Future research should explore the interplay of soft and hard power within sport diplomacy, examining its effectiveness across different regions. These studies can provide valuable insights into the potential of sports as a public diplomacy tool and guide the development of strategies that harness its soft power capabilities while addressing the unique challenges of varying international contexts. By advancing both theoretical and empirical analyses, sport diplomacy can further solidify its role as a pivotal component of contemporary public diplomacy (Santos, 2024: 665).

Sport diplomacy functions as a significant component of public diplomacy, leveraging the universal appeal and influence of sports to shape international perceptions, reflect a nation's cultural identity, and defend its interests. By integrating elements of both soft and hard power into a cohesive "smart power" strategy, sport diplomacy enables countries to project their values and foster mutual understanding on the global stage. International sporting events, such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, serve as platforms for nations to enhance their international power positions and engage in cultural exchange through the lens of soft power. The unification of sport and public diplomacy emphasizes the importance of utilizing sports strategically to advance national interests. Activities under the banner of sports diplomacy often include participation in international sporting organizations, promotion through national brands, and engagement with media and technology. These efforts are further amplified by sports ambassadors, lobbying activities, and projects designed to showcase a nation's athletic and cultural superiority. Through these channels, nations aim to extend their cultural influence,

strengthen their economies, and build a positive international image. To maximize the potential of sports diplomacy, a well-structured public diplomacy strategy is essential. This includes empowering sports managers with advanced training in sports management and equipping athletes, coaches, and other representatives with the necessary skills to act as effective sports ambassadors. By adopting a rational and strategic approach, countries can harness sports as a diplomatic tool to foster intercultural dialogue, build relationships, and enhance their global standing, making sports diplomacy a vital element of contemporary public diplomacy (Özsarı, Fişekçioğlu, Çetin & Temel, 2018: 346-347).

Sport diplomacy serves as a dynamic and multifaceted element of public diplomacy, utilizing the universal appeal of sports to foster intercultural dialogue, build trust, and promote reconciliation (Yağmurlu, 2019: 1367). Through mechanisms such as hosting international events, leveraging sports ambassadors, and engaging with media and technology, nations project their values, enhance their cultural influence, and strengthen their international standing. The intersection of sport and public diplomacy highlights the strategic importance of soft power in shaping perceptions and advancing national interests. However, the effectiveness of sport diplomacy is context-dependent, requiring tailored approaches that consider the unique cultural, political, and economic landscapes of each region. While international events like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup offer opportunities for cultural exchange and cooperation, they also pose challenges related to economic burdens, corruption, and potential political contention. These complexities underscore the need for transparency, strategic planning, and the empowerment of trained sports managers and representatives to maximize the benefits of sport diplomacy. By integrating theoretical insights with practical applications, sport diplomacy can address global challenges and foster mutual understanding, making it an indispensable component of contemporary public diplomacy. Its role in navigating the complexities of international relations and promoting shared values ensures that sport diplomacy remains a vital tool for building bridges between nations and cultures.

3. Soviets and Yugoslavia Cases

This section employs a comparative-historical approach to examine how sport was incorporated into diplomatic practice in two structurally comparable yet politically divergent socialist states: the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Rather than treating either case as representative of a single model, the analysis follows a “most-similar systems” logic in which both polities shared key background characteristics-state-socialist ideology, multiethnic social composition, centralized governance, and extensive investment in elite sport-while occupying markedly different

positions in the international system. The Soviet Union functioned as a Cold War superpower engaged in systemic ideological rivalry, whereas Yugoslavia operated as a non-aligned state seeking autonomy from both blocs. By holding constant these shared structural conditions and varying international status and strategic orientation, the comparison isolates how different geopolitical positions shaped the deployment of sport as a diplomatic and communicative instrument.

Within this framework, the analysis disaggregates sports diplomacy into three analytically comparable dimensions: (i) international representation (how sporting success was translated into claims of ideological legitimacy and global status), (ii) domestic integration (how sport was mobilized to manage multiethnic diversity and construct collective identity), and (iii) institutional mediation (how state and transnational sport organizations were used to coordinate external engagement). Across both cases, sport functioned as a symbolic resource for projecting authority and shaping perception, yet the meanings attached to this resource diverged according to each state's position in the international hierarchy. While the Soviet Union instrumentalized sport to demonstrate the presumed superiority of socialism and consolidate superpower status, Yugoslavia employed it to signal political autonomy, cultivate non-aligned partnerships, and reinforce internal cohesion.

Viewed through the lens of strategic communication, this comparative design highlights how state actors in both systems deliberately planned, coordinated, and synchronized sporting initiatives as part of broader, goal-oriented communication strategies. In line with contemporary public diplomacy scholarship, sport is thus analyzed not as an auxiliary cultural practice but as an integrated communicative domain-one in which messaging, institutional arrangements, and international visibility were purposefully aligned to achieve defined political and diplomatic objectives. The comparison of these two cases therefore does not seek simple similarity or difference but demonstrates how distinct geopolitical locations within a shared socialist framework produced divergent models of sports diplomacy and strategic communication.

3.1. Soviet Sport Diplomacy

In the Soviet Union, sport was intrinsically embedded within the state's ideological framework, functioning as a concrete manifestation of the collective ethos central to the communist system. Although individual athletes performed on international stages, their achievements were systematically framed as products of the Soviet system rather than as personal

accomplishments. This collectivist narrative positioned each athlete as a component of a broader social mechanism, symbolizing the strength and presumed superiority of socialist organization. The structure and success of team sports exemplified this principle, as players were expected to perform predefined roles in service of the collective rather than individual distinction. Management decisions concerning athletes' careers were rarely subject to challenge, reinforcing the state's comprehensive control over sporting life. Campaigns against so-called "star sickness" sought to discipline excessive individualism, reminding athletes of their subordination to the collective and aligning personal success with socialist values. This logic was most visibly articulated in globally resonant team sports. Football, in particular, provided a powerful arena for ideological projection: the Soviet Union's victory in the 1960 European Championship-defeating Yugoslavia in the final-symbolized not only athletic excellence but also the competitive assertion of socialist modernity on the European stage. Four years later, the USSR again reached the final, losing to Spain, while in the 1968 tournament Yugoslavia itself advanced to the final against Italy, illustrating how football became a recurrent site of ideological and geopolitical symbolism within Cold War Europe. Beyond football, the Soviet Union achieved sustained dominance in basketball and volleyball during the Cold War, securing consecutive European championships and reinforcing the image of a disciplined, system-driven sporting model. Through these practices, the Soviet state mobilized sport not merely to cultivate domestic pride but to assert ideological and political authority internationally (Angestav, 2022: 10). This systematic shaping of narratives and international perceptions exemplifies the strategic communication paradigm, in which athlete preparation, media messaging, and event organization were deliberately coordinated to serve broader state objectives. In this context, Soviet sports diplomacy operated not only as a form of soft power, but also as an instrument of strategic communication-integrating public diplomacy, cultural programming, and carefully managed international engagement to reinforce ideological legitimacy at home and abroad.

The Soviet Union effectively leveraged sports diplomacy as a strategic tool to build relationships with emerging states, potential allies, and neighbouring countries. By using sports as a means of fostering cooperation and creating connections, the Soviet regime expanded its influence in ways that traditional diplomacy often could not achieve. Athletic success, framed as ideological triumph, became a symbolic battleground during the Cold War, showcasing communism's superiority on the global stage. Domestically, these achievements cultivated national pride and reinforced the legitimacy of the communist system (Wallach, 2022: 29).

Such activities highlight the Soviet use of sport as a platform for deliberate and purposive messaging—hallmarks of strategic communication—targeting both the foreign public and elites to foster alliances, reshape international opinion, and legitimize its ideological position.

One of the earliest institutionalized examples of Soviet sports diplomacy can be traced to the international workers' sport movement of the 1920s, organized through structures such as the Red Sportintern (CSI) and expressed through transnational Spartakiad events. In this context, the First International Winter Workers' Spartakiad held in Oslo in 1928 functioned not merely as sport competition but as a vehicle for international linkage-building with proletarian sport organizations and for the projection of Soviet organizational capacity and ideological commitments (Phillis, 2013: 42). Against this earlier background, the World Festival of Youth and Students (launched in 1947) should be understood as a later, expanded phase of Soviet sports diplomacy—one that combined mass cultural programming with sport and political messaging to reach broader transnational audiences, particularly in the postwar and early Cold War environment (Lesnykh, 2020: 2). The design and execution of the Festival can be interpreted as a multifaceted strategic communication campaign, with coordinated sporting and cultural events enhancing message coherence and widening international reach.

The Soviet Union's debut at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics marked a decisive turning point in its sports diplomacy, reflecting broader cultural and ideological ambitions. Beyond sending a large and highly prepared athletic delegation, the USSR orchestrated an extensive cultural program—including dance performances, film screenings, and officially curated informational materials—to present socialist achievements to an international audience. The impact of this intervention becomes particularly visible when assessed through the medal table: the Soviet team finished second overall, narrowly behind the United States, a result that immediately positioned the USSR as a leading sporting power and challenged Western assumptions of Soviet backwardness or isolation. These efforts, embedded in the dynamics of the early Cold War, sought to demonstrate not only athletic excellence but the moral and systemic superiority of socialism. Soviet athletes were presented as ambassadors of peace, equality, and collective discipline, while domestic and international media narratives emphasized the contrast between socialist ideals of sport as a public good and what Soviet discourse portrayed as the ideological and individualist orientation of Western sport. Both athletic success and cultural programming were strategically mobilized to shape global perceptions and to win international legitimacy, making the Helsinki Games a key example of how the Soviet Union employed sport as an instrument of ideological influence (Hutchison, 2022: 40-41). This orchestration illustrates a

conscious alignment of sporting, cultural, and diplomatic outputs—consistent with an integrated strategic communication approach in which diverse communicative activities are coordinated to advance long-term political objectives.

Soviet sports diplomacy exemplified the strategic use of international athletic events to advance political objectives and shape public perception during the Cold War. The 1958 American-Soviet track and field dual meet in Moscow stands as a paradigmatic case. Framed as a gesture of peaceful coexistence, the event attracted approximately 75,000 spectators and received extensive media coverage, underscoring its diplomatic significance. While the competition itself remained intense, its public presentation emphasized cordiality and mutual respect. In performance terms, the United States accumulated the highest points in the men's events, whereas the Soviet team dominated the women's competitions; in the aggregate, however, the USSR secured a narrow overall victory by 172–170 (Turrini, 2001: 434). Beyond the Olympic arena, major continental tournaments likewise functioned as vehicles of ideological representation. The Soviet Union's victory in the 1960 European Football Championship, culminating in a final against Yugoslavia, exemplified how football—a sport with exceptional mass appeal—could be harnessed to project socialist modernity and international legitimacy (Missiroli, 2002: 1).

The tournament's symbolic resonance extended well beyond sport itself, situating athletic triumph within broader narratives of geopolitical competition and systemic credibility. These cases reveal the dual logic of Soviet sports diplomacy. On the one hand, international sporting success projected organizational capacity and ideological confidence; on the other, it structured controlled interaction with political rivals within highly visible, rule-bound arenas. By mobilizing sport as a platform for dialogue, recognition, and soft power, the USSR sought not merely to enhance its image but to affirm its status as a global superpower within a hierarchically competitive international system. Such events were therefore not peripheral diplomatic gestures but core elements of a state-directed strategic communication agenda, in which sport operated as both a symbolic and practical instrument for managing relations, shaping narratives, and pursuing political objectives (Kobierecki, 2017: 70–71).

Ice hockey diplomacy provides a revealing case of how sport was embedded in broader foreign policy calculations during the Cold War. Although ice hockey occupied a central place in Canadian national identity, the political significance of bilateral encounters with the Soviet Union derived less from Soviet diplomatic priorities than from Canada's own international positioning. For Ottawa, engagement with the USSR through sport offered an opportunity to

assert greater autonomy within the Western bloc and to diversify its diplomatic repertoire beyond an exclusive alignment with the United States. These initiatives also unfolded against the background of Canada's institutional disputes with the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), which had limited Canadian influence over international competition formats and eligibility rules. The 1972 Summit Series, often portrayed as a symbolic confrontation between capitalism and socialism, thus carried a distinct asymmetry of meaning. While the Soviet Union participated as a confident sporting power seeking recognition for its system, Canada approached the series as a strategic instrument for reasserting leadership in international hockey and for enhancing its diplomatic visibility on the global stage. The matches mobilized mass publics in both societies and generated intense symbolic capital; yet their broader political significance lay in how Canada leveraged sport to renegotiate its international status and institutional position within global sport governance. From this perspective, the Summit Series and related exchanges are best understood not simply as instances of Soviet sports diplomacy, but as complex exercises in strategic communication in which sport functioned as a medium for negotiating hierarchy, legitimacy, and autonomy within the Cold War order (Kobierecki, 2016: 22-23). Both sides employed the cultural language of hockey to project political meaning, but the diplomatic dividends were distributed unevenly, reflecting divergent national objectives rather than a symmetrical ideological contest.

Soviet sports diplomacy extended well beyond bilateral track-and-field meetings and the Olympic arena, intersecting with key moments of Cold War politics across multiple sports. In 1962, the East German team was denied entry to the Ice Hockey World Championship in Colorado, a decision widely interpreted as Western retaliation following the construction of the Berlin Wall; the episode prompted boycotts by the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and underscored how international sport could be mobilized as an instrument of geopolitical signaling (Mabillard, 2012). Tensions resurfaced in the aftermath of the Prague Spring in 1968, when fiercely contested encounters between Soviet and Czechoslovak teams became focal points of political protest and further damaged the USSR's standing in Central Europe. Yet one of the most consequential blows to the Soviet image in international sport had occurred earlier: the notorious 1956 Melbourne Olympic water polo match between the Soviet Union and Hungary, which came to symbolize the violent suppression of the Hungarian uprising and fixed a lasting association between Soviet sporting presence and political coercion in global public memory.

More broadly, ideological competition through sport did not emerge in the early 1970s but crystallized with the Soviet Union's first Olympic participation at Helsinki 1952 and continued as a structuring feature of international sport through Montreal 1976. During this period, elite competitions repeatedly functioned as arenas for projecting systemic superiority and contesting symbolic hierarchy. The early 1970s nevertheless illustrate the ambivalence of this dynamic. While ice hockey exchanges—most notably the 1972 Summit Series—combined moments of cooperation with intense rivalry, the dramatic 1972 Munich Olympic basketball final, in which the USSR defeated the United States 51–50 under highly controversial circumstances, delivered a symbolic shock to American prestige and deepened mutual suspicion (Aykurt, 2020). Unlike the conciliatory effects associated with “ping-pong diplomacy,” Munich reinforced the visibility of ideological contestation in sport (Aykurt, 2021). It is important, however, to avoid treating the “politicization of sport” as a phenomenon unique to the Cold War. The instrumentalization of sport for political purposes had already been institutionalized under fascist regimes in interwar Europe and continued—albeit in different forms—during the superpower rivalry. By the mid-1970s, a partial climate of détente had begun to reshape the international sporting order, reflected most notably in the IOC's decision to award the 1980 Summer Olympics to Moscow. The subsequent cycle of boycotts nonetheless revealed the fragility of this accommodation: the U.S.-led boycott of Moscow in 1980 and the Soviet-led boycott of Los Angeles in 1984 disrupted cultural exchange, though not symmetrically. Unlike the 1980 Games, the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics proceeded successfully and proved financially profitable for local organizers, indicating both the limits of reciprocal retaliation and the growing entanglement of global sport with commercial logics. Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that while Soviet sports diplomacy could generate national pride and symbolic victories, its effectiveness was structurally constrained by the broader currents of international politics. Sport remained a significant resource of soft power, yet one whose meaning and impact were continually shaped—and often circumscribed—by geopolitical conflict.

Beginning with the Soviet Union's Olympic debut at Helsinki in 1952, Soviet sports diplomacy developed into a central instrument for projecting ideological superiority and for translating athletic performance into claims of systemic legitimacy within the Cold War order. The Olympic Games became the primary arena of this rivalry, where international prestige was publicly quantified through medal tables—especially gold medals—and where Soviet successes were narrated as evidence of socialist organizational capacity and moral-political

coherence. In parallel, Soviet strategy extended beyond competition results to the governance of international sport. Rather than remaining a passive participant, the USSR sought to expand influence within the Olympic movement by cultivating alignments with newly independent states and by supporting initiatives that altered the balance of power inside Olympic institutions; for instance, accounts of IOC politics in the 1960s-early 1970s describe African IOC members working closely with Soviet IOC figure Konstantin Andrianov in campaigns that helped secure South Africa's exclusion from the Olympic movement and related measures, illustrating how Soviet influence could operate through coalition-building inside sports administration (Wright, 2015: 221).

The 1980 Moscow Olympics represented the apex of this strategy in terms of visibility and symbolic staging, but the U.S.-led boycott in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan significantly constrained the event's intended diplomatic payoff. The Soviet-led boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Games, however, did not function as an equally effective "retaliation" in diplomatic or organizational terms: despite the absence of the USSR and several allies, the Los Angeles Olympics proceeded with record participation for the period (140 nations) and is widely recognized as operationally and financially successful for local organizers, indicating the limits of reciprocal boycott politics. Taken together, the post-1952 period demonstrates that Soviet sports diplomacy was not reducible to athletic success alone; it operated as a multi-level strategic communication practice linking competition, international representation, and institutional coalition-building in global sport governance, even as its diplomatic effects remained contingent on wider geopolitical dynamics (Vonnard & Marston, 2020: 224–227).

3.2. Yugoslavian Sport Diplomacy

Yugoslavian sport played a pivotal role in the nation-building and ideological agenda of socialist Yugoslavia, closely aligned with the broader objectives of the communist regime. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the new leadership sought to reconstruct not only the country's physical and economic infrastructure but also its social and cultural order. Sport became a strategic instrument in this project. Building on pre-war traditions, the Yugoslav communists restructured the sporting landscape by dissolving "bourgeois" clubs and establishing new, state-aligned associations such as Partizan and Red Star, while placing national coordination under institutions like the Fiskulturni Savez Jugoslavije (FSJ). These reforms embedded sport within socialist organizational principles-mass participation, collectivism, political education, and the subordination of individual achievement to collective goals. Sport was also central to the promotion of the doctrine of "Brotherhood and Unity,"

serving as a practical mechanism for reconciliation among the federation's diverse ethnic and regional communities and for the construction of a shared Yugoslav identity. The state-sponsored system of physical culture emphasized youth mobilization, labour discipline, and preparedness for national defence, directly reflecting the regime's ideological priorities. At the international level, concrete sporting achievements functioned as symbols of Yugoslav socialism's modernity and effectiveness. These included, most prominently, the national basketball team's breakthrough at the 1968 Olympic Games and its subsequent European and World Championship titles, as well as sustained success in football, culminating in high-profile club achievements and strong national-team performances in European competitions. Such results projected an image of a technologically modern, socially cohesive, and internationally competitive socialist society. In this sense, Yugoslav sport operated simultaneously as a mechanism of domestic integration and as a tool of external representation. The Yugoslav approach to sports diplomacy thus reflected a deliberate and integrated communication strategy: sport functioned as both a unifying internal narrative and an outward-facing projection of Yugoslavia's distinct, non-aligned socialist identity. This purposive mobilization of athletic institutions within broader nation-building and foreign-policy frameworks closely corresponds to the core principles of strategic communication (Brentin & Zec, 2018: 4-6).

After the Second World War, Yugoslavia did not merely employ sport as a symbolic marker of socialist values but institutionalized it as a governable and exportable policy instrument. The post-war reorganization of the sporting field replaced pre-war civic structures with a centralized administrative framework through which athletic activity could be standardized, monitored, and aligned with state objectives. The establishment of the Fiskulturni Savez Jugoslavije (FSJ) as the nationwide coordinating body was pivotal in this transformation, as it regulated competitions, training regimes, and international participation across the republics, converting sport into a routinized domain of public administration rather than a loosely organized cultural practice. This organizational consolidation also enabled the systematic deployment of sport in foreign relations. Following the Tito–Stalin split in 1948, international sporting exchanges, tours, and federation-level contacts were increasingly coordinated with diplomatic priorities, allowing Yugoslavia to signal political autonomy from the Soviet bloc while cultivating ties with non-aligned states. In this sense, Yugoslav sport functioned as a practical diplomatic interface: not simply reflecting ideological commitments articulated elsewhere, but translating foreign-policy positioning into highly visible, repeatable

international encounters that enhanced recognition, legitimacy, and strategic communication abroad (Sbetti, 2018: 65-70).

Yugoslav basketball constituted an important-yet not hegemonic-pillar of the country's sports diplomacy, developing as a state-supported model closely embedded in socialist institutions and international positioning. Unlike the commercially oriented U.S. system, Yugoslav basketball relied on centralized talent identification and long-term training programs, producing sustained competitiveness from the 1960s onward. A visible milestone was the silver medal at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics; however, this achievement should be situated within a broader competitive hierarchy in which the Soviet Union remained the dominant force in European basketball, winning eight consecutive championships between 1957 and 1971 (Olympics, n.d.).

During this period, Yugoslavia reached four European Championship finals but was unable to break Soviet supremacy. Yugoslav ascendancy emerged only later, most notably between 1973 and 1977, when the national team captured three European titles, and again in the late 1980s and early 1990s with renewed international success. This trajectory underscores that Yugoslav basketball functioned less as an instrument of unchallenged dominance than as a carefully cultivated platform of visibility within a competitive socialist sporting order. Its international resonance was amplified through modern infrastructure, coaching exchanges, and extensive international tours, which promoted a distinctive developmental model abroad. Even after the country's dissolution in the 1990s, the legacy of this system persisted, as former Yugoslav players and coaches attained global prominence, particularly in the NBA, although successor states struggled to reproduce the integrative capacity of the unified federation (Perica, 2001: 268-274). Importantly, Yugoslavia's sports diplomacy was not confined to basketball alone: football provided parallel arenas of symbolic representation, with national-team finals at the 1960 and 1968 European Championships, while water polo offered another domain of sustained international success (Njoroge, 2013). Taken together, these achievements reveal a multi-sport strategy of international engagement in which basketball operated as one-highly visible but not exclusive-component of a broader diplomatic repertoire, structured through coordinated training systems, media narratives, and transnational exchanges that projected Yugoslavia's distinct model onto the global stage.

Football played a major role in Yugoslav sports diplomacy, serving as both a tool for unity and a reflection of political change. After World War II, the federal league and the establishment of prominent clubs like Dinamo Zagreb, Hajduk Split, Red Star Belgrade, and

Partizan Belgrade embodied the ideals of socialist integration, even as ethnic divisions persisted. In the 1970s, collective self-management was incorporated into football, and the national team structure symbolized the policy of “brotherhood and unity”, helping to rally support across ethnic lines. However, the 1980s brought rising ethnic tensions, with stadiums becoming arenas for nationalist expression and political manipulation-most notably as fan groups were drawn into the violence of the Yugoslav Wars. Red Star Belgrade’s 1991 European Cup win symbolized both the unity and fractures of the federation, as triumphs on the field were soon overshadowed by deepening nationalistic divisions (Claire, 2024: 34-37). These developments underline both the potential and fragility of sports as vehicles for strategic communication: while sporting success can foster unity and boost international reputation, mismanagement or manipulation can amplify social divisions and undermine the very goals they aim to achieve.

Yugoslav sports diplomacy illustrates the intricate interdependence of athletics, politics, and national identity within a socialist framework. Anchored in the doctrine of “Brotherhood and Unity,” the state mobilized sport both to mitigate ethnic divisions and to project a distinctive, non-aligned political identity internationally. Basketball’s emergence as a highly visible arena of excellence symbolized collective achievement and facilitated exchanges with global powers, while football operated less as a causal agent of disintegration than as a politicized arena in which broader conflicts were refracted. This is most clearly demonstrated by Yugoslavia’s exclusion from the final stages of the 1992 European Championship only days before the tournament began-a decision driven not by sporting considerations but by international sanctions amid the escalation of war-revealing how geopolitical developments could override athletic merit and reconfigure sporting representation (Nunes & Valério, 2020: 71). At the same time, the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics stand as a counterpoint, epitomizing Yugoslavia’s capacity to deploy sport as an instrument of international recognition, organizational competence, and symbolic unity at the very moment when internal tensions were becoming more pronounced (Moll, 2014: 127-128). Taken together, these episodes show that Yugoslav sport functioned simultaneously as a vehicle of diplomatic visibility and as a medium through which political authority, international legitimacy, and internal fractures were negotiated. Rather than merely mirroring social change, Yugoslav sports diplomacy actively translated shifting power relations into highly visible international encounters, offering a concentrated lens on the intersection of sport, politics, and societal transformation.

Conclusion

The examination of Soviet and Yugoslav sport diplomacy demonstrates that the incorporation of sport into international relations cannot be reduced to soft power or public diplomacy alone. Rather, both cases reveal strategic communication as the organizing framework through which sporting activities were deliberately planned, coordinated, and deployed to achieve political and diplomatic objectives. At a general level, the two states display important commonalities: in both systems, sport was institutionalized as a state-managed domain, embedded within centralized governance structures, and mobilized to project ideological narratives, shape international perceptions, and contribute to domestic integration. In this sense, sport functioned in both contexts as a communicative resource that translated political priorities into highly visible international performances.

At the same time, the comparative analysis brings into relief fundamental differences rooted in each state's position within the international system. As a Cold War superpower, the Soviet Union integrated sport into a comprehensive strategic communication apparatus aimed at asserting systemic superiority, competing for global hierarchy, and reinforcing ideological legitimacy through quantifiable measures of success such as Olympic medal tables and high-profile international encounters. Soviet sports diplomacy was thus outwardly competitive and hierarchically oriented, seeking to demonstrate dominance and to manage relations with rivals within a polarized geopolitical order. Yugoslavia, by contrast, employed sport less as an instrument of hegemonic rivalry than as a means of political positioning and diplomatic differentiation. Operating as a non-aligned state, it used sport to signal autonomy from both blocs, cultivate partnerships across the Global South, and project a distinct socialist identity compatible with cooperation and mediation. While the Soviet model prioritized systemic competition and symbolic supremacy, the Yugoslav model emphasized visibility, recognition, and flexibility within a fragmented international environment.

Differences are equally apparent in the domestic functions of sport. In the Soviet case, athletic success was closely tied to a narrative of collective discipline and state superiority, reinforcing ideological conformity and centralized authority. In Yugoslavia, sport also served integrative purposes, but it operated within a more plural and multiethnic federation, where international events could simultaneously promote unity and expose political vulnerability—as illustrated by moments such as the 1984 Sarajevo Winter Olympics on the one hand and the country's exclusion from the 1992 European Football Championship on the other. These contrasting trajectories show that while both states mobilized sport to construct identity and

legitimacy, the meanings attached to sporting success varied according to institutional structure, geopolitical status, and patterns of internal diversity.

Taken together, the cases demonstrate that sport diplomacy is most fruitfully understood as a modality of strategic communication-adaptive, goal-oriented, and embedded in broader policy frameworks-but that its concrete functions and outcomes are contingent on a state's relative power and international positioning. Where the Soviet Union used sport to consolidate superpower status through competitive display, Yugoslavia employed it to negotiate autonomy and visibility within a non-aligned diplomatic strategy. This comparative finding underscores that the political efficacy of sport does not reside in athletic performance alone, but in how sporting practices are institutionally organized, narratively framed, and aligned with wider foreign-policy objectives.

In light of these insights, future research on sport diplomacy should move beyond generalized claims about soft power to examine how different configurations of power, governance, and identity shape the communicative uses of sport. Comparative studies that attend to both similarities in institutional design and divergences in strategic intent can better capture the conditions under which sport becomes an effective instrument of international engagement. As global competition and information flows intensify, the capacity to integrate sport into coherent, multidimensional communication strategies will remain a critical variable in how states and other actors seek to manage reputation, influence, and political meaning on the world stage.

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Yazar Beyanı

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız çift kör hakem değerlendirmesi yapılmıştır.

Yazar Katkısı: Yazar %100 katkı sağlamıştır.

Destek ve Teşekkür Beyanı: Çalışmada herhangi bir destek bulunmamaktadır.

Etik Onay: Bu çalışma etik kurul izni gerektirmemektedir.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı: Çalışmada herhangi bir çatışma bulunmamaktadır.

Peer Review: Independent double-blind peer review was conducted.

Author Contributions: The author contributed 100% to the study.

Funding and Acknowledgement: No support was received for the study.

Ethics Approval: Ethics committee approval is not applicable to this study.

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person related to the study.