

ФІЛОСОФІЯ ТА ПОЛІТОЛОГІЯ В КОНТЕКСТІ СУЧАСНОЇ КУЛЬТУРИ

ISSN 2663-0265 (print) ISSN 2663-0273 (online)

Journal home page: <https://fip.dp.ua/index.php/FIP>

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УДК 327:7

**SPORTS AND INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION:  
HOW QATAR AND SAUDI ARABIA UTILIZE SPORTS TO ENHANCE THEIR IMAGE**

*Received 13 June 2024; revised 3 July 2024; accepted 9 July 2024*

DOI: 10.15421/352432

**Abstract**

*Modern international relations contemplate the rise of sports as an effective instrument of foreign policy, enabling nations to enhance their global reputation and project soft power. This article aims to explore the sports diplomacy of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, focusing on their methods of building international reputation and raising the issue of sportswashing as a phenomenon. The foundation of the research is the analysis of official state documents, key sporting events, and recent news surrounding the development of these countries. The major research finding is that both countries use their substantial financial resources to advance their global image and economic diversification. Qatar emphasizes hosting high-profile events, developing sponsorships and partnerships, and investing in international sports entities, while Saudi Arabia focuses on attracting renowned athletes to its domestic league and using their image and fanbase. Key results indicate that Qatar and Saudi Arabia have significantly enhanced their reputation and image by hosting the FIFA World Cup and attracting famous athletes. Yet, another outcome is the rising concern about sportswashing, the concept under which Qatar and Saudi Arabia utilize sports to divert international attention from human rights violations or political problems. The article identifies countermeasures, including leveraging non-state actors, implementing specific regulations, and using boycotts and media campaigns. The work acknowledges the potential of sports diplomacy but underlines the need for solid responses from international actors to address sportswashing. In the end, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and issues of sports diplomacy in contemporary international relations, offering insights into effective strategies, negative implications, and solutions to them.*

**Keywords:** *sports, diplomacy, international reputation, international image, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, sportswashing.*

**СПОРТ І МІЖНАРОДНА РЕПУТАЦІЯ: ЯК КАТАР І САУДІВСЬКА АРАВІЯ  
ВИКОРИСТОВУЮТЬ СПОРТ ДЛЯ ЗМІЦНЕННЯ ІМІДЖУ**

**Анотація**

*Сучасні міжнародні відносини розглядають спорт як ефективний спосіб впровадження зовнішньої політики, що дозволяє країнам впливати на свій міжнародний імідж і репутацію. З огляду на це, стаття має на меті дослідити спортивну дипломатію Катару і Саудівської Аравії, зосередитись на їхніх методах побудови міжнародної репутації, та підняти проблему спортсвошингу як явища. Основою дослідження є аналіз офіційних документів держав, ключових спортивних подій, останніх публікацій і новин щодо їх розвитку. Зафіксовано, що обидві країни використовують свої значні фінансові ресурси для зміцнення іміджу та економічної диверсифікації. У своїх намаганнях, Катар надає перевагу проведенню масштабних спортивних заходів, розвитку спонсорства та партнерства, а також інвестуванню в міжнародні спортивні організації, тоді як Саудівська Аравія зосереджена на залученні найкращих спортсменів до своєї національної спортивної ліги та використанні їх*

медійного впливу. Ключові результати свідчать, що Катар і Саудівська Аравія значно покращили свою репутацію та імідж завдяки проведенню Чемпіонату світу з футболу та співпраці з відомими спортсменами. Тим не менш, стаття також піднімає питання спортивношингу як явища, що передбачає використання Катаром і Саудівською Аравією спорту для відвернення уваги міжнародної спільноти від порушень прав людини чи політичних проблем. У статті визначаються заходи протидії цьому явищу, включно із залученням медіа, недержавних акторів і регуляторів. Доведено, що спортивна дипломатія має неабиякий потенціал для впливу на імідж країни, та вимагає від міжнародних акторів постійного контролю та рішучих відповідей щодо проявів спортивношингу. Як результат, стаття сприяє глибшому розумінню складнощів та проблем спортивної дипломатії в сучасних міжнародних відносинах, розглядаючи ефективні стратегії, негативні явища, та протидію їм.

**Ключові слова:** спорт, дипломатія, міжнародна репутація, міжнародний імідж, Катар, Саудівська Аравія, спортивношинг.

### **Problem statement.**

Contemporary international relations developments demonstrate the rise of sports as a functional instrument of foreign policy. It allows nations and organizations to enhance their global reputation and project soft power. Hosting mega sporting events, investing in sports entities, transferring image, and developing sports infrastructure are key strategies that countries implement to improve their image. Among them, such nations as Saudi Arabia and Qatar stand out, as they actively integrate these methods by leveraging their financial resources. The way how Qatar and Saudi Arabia resort to sports diplomacy is an interesting reflection of their economic capabilities and strategic goals to diversify their global influence. They use sporting events and investments to boost domestic sports, enhance standing, and support partnerships. Yet, their cases offer positive and negative implications for global policy.

Therefore, the article will focus on opportunities for such policies for the nations and underline the threats that appear before the international order. The reason lies in how the usage of sports diplomacy can be a tool to divert attention from the country's actions. Alongside international cooperation, and cultural exchange that show the positive implications for all systems, such a phenomenon as 'sportswashing' appears and requires particular attention. It contemplates that sports diplomacy can help countries to shift focus from their issues or abuses, and dodge negative perceptions.

Even though the global actors are aware of such actions, not so many organizations oppose them, offering room for further research. By analyzing

key developments and initiatives, this article will examine the effects of the sports diplomacy of Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the international system and its possible negative impacts. The novelty of this article lies in its focus on the analysis of Saudi Arabia and Qatar's effective approaches to sports diplomacy and evaluation of how the international community can counter such negative effects as sportswashing.

**The purpose of this article** is to examine how Saudi Arabia and Qatar use sports to improve their global image, the strategies they employ, and assess their impacts on international relations, underlining key lessons and negative developments.

### **Literature review.**

The research on the specific topic requires a proper understanding of such terms as sports diplomacy, soft power, image, and their effects. Using sports for cultural and economic gains has been a common practice for centuries. Yet, with the rise of media, communication, and non-coercive impacts, it emerges as a soft power tool. Joseph S. Nye, one of the pioneers in this particular field, defines soft power as the ability to affect the behavior of others via «attraction and persuasion», where "information provides power" that can be used both by governments and non-state actors [Nye 2019: 7;10]. There, sport with its ability to transcend borders allows the attraction of people, opportunities, and persuading or creating image. Stuart Murray states that countries utilize sports within their soft power efforts to support their image and reputation, form a brand, and build links [Murray 2018].

It provides the ground for further consideration of sports diplomacy and its effect on

image and reputation development. For instance, Dubinsky underlines that these two concepts are determined by the target audience of the nation's branding efforts of the country that is associated with products or places [Dubinsky 2023: 31]. On the other hand, Kobierecki, when analyzing China's methods, concludes that the country can use sports contacts, exchanges, developments, and the economic potential of the leagues to shape its international image [Kobierecki 2018: 117]. Besides, sporting mega-events (SMEs) offer another instrument, as they offer a public diplomacy platform for nations to "communicate with and influence foreign audiences" and gain international visibility [Rookwood 2019: 38].

In this regard, Bergkvist and Skeiseid pay significant attention to the role of image transfer, as the "transfer of non-evaluative associations from the sports property" or entity to the country, and compare it to leveraged marketing communications [Bergkvist and Skeiseid 2024: 1099]. Nonetheless, they consider this term in relation to sportswashing. This concept, implying the usage of sports diplomacy as a method to covert or distract from political issues, abuses, or problems, has been implemented by different countries, from Argentina and Azerbaijan to Russia and China in the last decades [Chen and Doran 2022].

There, the cases of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with their economic power and influence, are vivid, illustrating them as prominent users of sports diplomacy. Qatar managed to benefit from hosting an SME, while Saudi Arabia leveraged its sponsorship contracts, celebrities, and sports league development [Mosly 2022]. Based on the review of official documents and recent studies, their practice offers great lessons for other countries, not necessarily rich or developed, that should be discussed. Yet, it also offers a ground for the discussion of sportswashing, as many scientists and the media have accused them of it [Skey 2022]. The research shows a lack of analysis on how sports entities and representatives can counter sportswashing. Thus, the consideration of the countermeasures can significantly add to the novelty and further research of the topic alongside interesting lessons from the practice of these countries.

### **Main results of the research.**

#### **Qatari Usage of Sports for Improvement International Standing**

The evaluation of the efforts of Qatar to use sports to improve its image and international standing should begin with an understanding of the country's main goals and resources. It will allow for getting a basis for comprehension of its effects and results.

It is worth starting with the analysis of the official stance of the Qatari government on sports diplomacy. Before all, the government sees sports as a communication tool, economic contributor, and ground for partnership development. In an interview about the Qatar World Cup, Qatari Ambassador Dr. Al-Muftah underlines that sports diplomacy initiatives have their roots in National Vision 2030, adopted in 2008, where investments and projects carried out reinforce the Qatari national brand and strengthen global position [Jewell 2022]. Within the 2030 strategy, the areas of Social and Economic Development laid the foundation for the rise of sports as a tool, having an effect on partnerships and social relations and allowing economic cooperation with other countries. For Qatar, as well as other Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, sports allowed them to diversify their oil-dependent economies [Mosly 2022]. Therefore, the application of sports by Qatar has been dedicated to three major goals: strengthen the image, diversify the economy, and create more opportunities for further cooperation, implying using enormous economic resources and strong support from the government.

With knowledge of goals and objectives, it is easier to see the instruments and effects of the policies applied by Qatar in terms of its sports soft power efforts. The major part of its national branding strategy is mega-events hosting. Subject to Al-Dosari, Qatar, when applying sports diplomacy within mega hosting, uses arguments and policies shaped within narratives to foster sustainability and create a certain legacy [Al-Dosari 2021]. It allows the country to change how the world sees it and change certain narratives or perceptions. In particular, in the last decades, Qatar has managed to host several mega events of world and regional significance, including the Qatar MotoGP in 2004, AFC Asian

Cup in 2011, World Athletics Championships (49 events), Qatar F1 Grand Prix in 2021 [Visit Qatar 2024]. In the Middle East region, a region that was considered unstable for years, the continuous hosting of such events made Qatar an area of stability due to becoming a central sports event hosting place in the region.

Yet, one should pay attention to hosting FIFA World Cup in 2022, as the biggest win of Qatar sports diplomacy. The reason is that it is a worldwide event, allowing significant image transfer from the event to the hosting country. The following stats help to evaluate the reputational impact and the reach: more than 1 million spectators attended its matches; approximately 5 billion people engaged in the event via media means; while the social media coverage resulted in 93.6 million posts and around 6 billion engagements [FIFA 2022]. The tournament included countries from all over the world, including representatives from Europe, South and North America, Africa, and Asia. Considering the concept of soft power, Qatar used tournaments to set partnerships with governments, associations, and non-state actors. Moreover, it affects the image of Qatar abroad via media, especially among the Western population. Al-Dosari underlines that “FIFA signifies not only a football game but also modernity, especially by the Western’s definition,” which allowed Qatar to change a narrative about itself, especially in the Western world [Al-Dosari 2021: 159]. Other than that, Qatar had an opportunity to link it to the concepts and narratives that FIFA promotes, referring to sustainability, peace, and human rights, as well as regional strength, being the first Arab country to host such a big event. From a reputation point of view, Qatar now has an enormous legacy that could reinforce its political (especially in terms of Western validation), economic, and cultural agendas, regionally and worldwide.

Considering the second goal, economic diversification, Qatar appeared to have reaffirmed its standing as the entertainment hub, supported investing policies and initiatives and strengthened media influence in regard to sport. Subject to the IMF Report, the World Cup resulted in the fact that 80% of the World Cup audience stayed in the Arab Countries of the Gulf; brought tourism and

broadcasting revenues equalling from US\$2.3 to 4.1 billion; and supported the strong presence of tourists in the subsequent years [Bibolov et al. 2024]. One can conclude that these results offer a significant basis for the development of national branding and the implementation of more initiatives within the National Tourism Sector Strategy by the government.

Besides, Qatar Sports Diplomacy is pretty effective for nation branding and image creation not only via events but also via sports business development. Through sponsorships and investments, Qatar creates connections and links the image of the country to international sports entities and actors. Qatar Sports Investment company is central to it, bringing diversification of the economy via international partnerships. This sovereign wealth fund, created in 2005 to help substitute the oil-gas economy, was crucial to purchasing Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), the leading French football club, turning it into a famous football brand in Europe [Côme and Raspaud 2018]. With such initiatives, Qatar aims to invest in sports enterprises, organizations, and technologies worldwide. That way, they not only generate revenues and knowledge to create a Qatari business sports economy but also connect with the fanbase, sportspersons, and sports networks worldwide. Other than that, they actively use media, in particular, the Al Jazeera Sports chain to purchase rights for broadcasting sports in Europe [Côme and Raspaud 2018]. It allows them to set the narratives, connect with sponsors, and create projects for the benefit of Qatari tourism, sports, and mega-events.

As a result, through hosting mega-events like the FIFA World Cup 2022, Qatar fosters global visibility and narrative change, portraying itself as a stable and modern country. Additionally, Qatar’s investments in sports businesses, such as Paris Saint-Germain, and media ventures like Al Jazeera Sports, further integrate the nation into the global sports network, supporting its economic diversification and tourism growth.

### **Saudi Arabia’s Application of Sports Diplomacy**

Saudi Arabia is another significant actor among Gulf Countries that has been actively using sports to improve its international standing

and develop a better image. Even though Qatar and Saudi Arabia have similar goals, they seem to have a slightly different approach. Both pay significant attention to hosting events and advancing facilities, yet, Saudi Arabia also focuses on investments in sports entities, marketing efforts, and the development of their own league.

First, it is crucial to consider the efforts of the country to invest in sports entities. Similar to Qatar, Saudi Arabia uses its investment organizations to purchase sports entities with history. In 2021, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment fund managed to buy Newcastle United Football Club, a high-profile English club with significant background, creating an image of a "football-loving" country [Moritz and Merrington 2021: 5]. It comes in line with the plan to create the image of a modern country via football club privatization, sports events hosting, and promotion. For instance, with the support Sports Development Fund, Saudi Arabia was a host to such world events: World Wrestling Entertainment, Boxing matches, Professional Golf Association events, as well as motorsport tournaments [Chen and Doran 2022]. This fact supports the role of investing in the development of facilities or Sports Cities for hosting the events.

Other than that, Saudi Arabia pays significant attention to the usage of the image of non-state actors to enhance its reputation as a sports country and entertainment destination. In this regard, they actively worked to invite the best players into their football league, including Ronaldo, Neymar, and Benzema, with an enormous fanbase worldwide [Schaer 2023]. It aims to pursue two goals: to increase the competitiveness of the Saudi League and to get the attention of football fans and sports entrepreneurs from the whole world. In terms of marketing efforts, it offers significant perspectives that can be used for the promotion of upcoming events, including future World Cup. The players that represent state-funded clubs are likely to become ambassadors or faces of the sports events in Saudi Arabia. For example, Saudi Arabia managed to partner with another football star, Lionel Messi, who is now an official brand ambassador of Saudi Arabia's Tourism Authority and actively participates in the "Saudi, Welcome

to Arabia" campaign [Arab News Editor's Board 2024]. In this regard, one should understand that each of the stars mentioned in this paragraph has an enormous social media fanbase. For instance, Cristiano Ronaldo has around 629 million followers, Messi around 502 million, Neymar around 221 million, and Benzema around 76 million followers [Thomas 2024]. As a result, Saudi Arabia specifically targets sportsmen with significant images so that they can communicate Saudi Arabia's values, sports culture, and events. There, the accumulation of such stars and quality players is likely to support the development of the league and turn Saudi sports more competitive and attractive from the point of entertainment.

One can conclude that Saudi Arabia employs a slightly different approach to sports diplomacy to elevate its international image and standing. Beyond hosting major events, Saudi Arabia invests heavily in prominent sports entities, attracting top-tier football talent, including Ronaldo, Neymar, Benzema, and Messi, to its domestic league, thereby boosting global attention and competitiveness.

#### **Sportswashing: A Significant Concern**

Even though the sports diplomacy of Qatar and Saudi Arabia provides effective ways for other countries to improve their reputation and image via sports, it also raises a serious concern for international organizations and actors — sportswashing. It is an intentional "attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information" [Bergkvist and Skeiseid 2024: 1095]. Notably, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are accused of diverting attention from such issues as poor human rights records, illiberal activities, or support of radical movements. In particular, Saudi Arabia was criticized for promoting Wahhabism, perceived as a radical movement across the international community, and ongoing human abuses, like the murder of a journalist [Berkvist and Skeiseid 2024; Chan and Doran 2022]. Qatar is said to use sports to disassociate from human rights abuses and illiberal attitudes towards women [Skey 2022]. As a result, sportswashers use such sports values as peace, freedom, and sustainability as tools to create positive connotations and ensure image transfer from an event or sports celebrity to the

sportswashing entity, in this case, to Saudi Arabia or Qatar.

There, the question arises, whether it is a concern for international actors and systems if such an application of sports diplomacy exists. It certainly is, especially if it confronts the principles and policies of actors being parties to or objects of sports diplomacy. Yet, there are not so many recognized strategies that they can use to counter sportswashing. The examination of cases helps to see three main ways to diminish its effect or prevent the creation of association: activism, regulations, and boycotting/banning.

Firstly, organizations and associations can use non-state actors to speak up about or act upon abuse or issues to counter the influence. For instance, Lewis Hamilton, a famous F1 driver, talked openly about the necessity to raise political issues when driving the Saudi Arabia Grand Prix, while the football superstars, Alexandra Popp and Alex Morgan, managed to stop a Saudi sponsorship of the Women's World Cup by speaking out about human rights abuse [VanOpdorp 2023]. Such a tactic shows that it can work if there is enough pressure and voice from key players on the entities that work with a sportswasher.

Secondly, communities, states, and non-actors can encourage specific regulations and determine values on the highest level to prevent sponsorships or investments related to sportswashing. In this regard, the English Premier League is a vivid example of what an organ or regulator can do under societal pressure. In 2023, the Premier League added a new rule that allows the disqualification of owners of clubs in regard to violence or hate crimes offenses under Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020 [Merritt 2024]. It can be seen as a response to the pressure by fans of clubs bought by Gulf countries. Sure, such an approach has its limitations as it is likely to be applied to a person and not a fund, yet, if applied, for instance, to bidding rules related to sports events, it can work as a great filter criterion. Lastly, the state and non-state actors can boycott tournaments, ban sportsmen, or use media to convey the message.

In the end, to counter sportswashing

actors can utilize several strategies, including publicly addressing political issues, adopting disqualification rules and regulations, starting boycotts, banning sportspeople, and leveraging media. Yet, another important condition should be a firm reaction from the public.

### **Conclusions.**

This article demonstrates the strategic use of sports diplomacy by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to enhance their global image and influence. Both nations leverage their financial resources to host sporting events and invest in sports entities to support image and economic diversification. Yet, Qatar sees hosting mega-events, investing, and developing partnerships as primary policies, while Saudi Arabia focuses on attracting famous athletes to its domestic league and using their image to support its overall sports diplomacy efforts.

These efforts are illustrative of how other countries can use sports diplomacy. However, the study also underlines such an issue as sportswashing, where sports are used to divert attention from human rights abuses and illiberal activities. Both countries have faced criticism for applying sports diplomacy to improve their image while violating human rights, promoting illiberal activities, and supporting radical movements. In this regard, the study defines that other countries can resort to certain countermeasures. They are limited but include leveraging the influence of non-state actors, implementing specific regulations, and utilizing boycotts and media campaigns. Notable examples include Lewis Hamilton's, Alex Morgan's, and Alexandra Popp's advocacy during or before events, and the English Premier League's disqualification rules.

This analysis underlines the need for responses from international actors to address the challenges posed by sportswashing while acknowledging the positive potential of sports diplomacy in fostering international cooperation and cultural exchange. By examining these dynamics, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and dualities of sports diplomacy in contemporary international relations.

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