

NATIONAL REPORT



COUNTRY:
BULGARIA

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1. SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL SPORT SYSTEM/ARCHITECTURE

The main institution in the sports pyramid of Bulgaria is the Ministry of Youth and Sport, which is mainly responsible for the development and implementation of the sports policy established by the government. The Ministry is divided into two structures, General Administration and Special Administration. The former manages the finances, proposes a legal framework, has administrative functions and directs PR actions. The Special Administration is focused on sport for all, performance sport, and youth activities, and includes various departments for investment and public offers. The Ministry of Youth and Sport develops relationships with other actors of Bulgarian sport, such as national federations and the Bulgarian Olympic Committee, and finances these organisations. The Bulgarian Olympic Committee is responsible for Olympic sports.

Bulgarian Sport actions are based on the National Strategy for Physical Education and Sport adopted by the National Assembly in 2011, which planned the period 2012-2022. The strategy had two directions of development: modernisation of sports facilities and improvement of the national system for physical education and sport. In this direction, local authorities, and other ministries, like the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Defence, are involved in supporting regional sport, and sport preparation for different categories of people.

2. TO WHAT EXTENT IS THERE A SPORT DIPLOMACY STRATEGY?

Sport was part of cultural diplomacy in Bulgaria during the socialist period (Gadjeva, 2019). The Bulgarian Communist Party decided on the sport strategy, and sport was an important tool for the state (Girginov, 2009). The fall of the political regime in 1990 changed the strategy of the Bulgarian authorities in terms of sport (Girginov, 2001). “During the socialist period of Bulgaria, sport diplomacy was part of the politics, but in the modern era, Bulgarian officials underestimate sport as a part of diplomacy and they use it mainly for their image”, explains Teodor Borisov, historian, journalist and expert in socio-political aspects of sport in his country.

Bulgaria has never had a formal national sport diplomacy strategy. When it comes to objectives that could be attributable to sport diplomacy in Bulgaria, some directions followed by the Bulgarian actors can be identified, like improving the country’s reputation, promoting the Bulgarian identity, improving diplomatic relations, and developing business opportunities.

During the regime of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (2009-2013, 2014-2017, and 2017-2021), Bulgaria hosted many international sports events in disciplines where the country has a tradition. For example, in 2018, Sofia hosted the Rhythmic Gymnastics World Championships, and in September 2022 the city hosted this event again. Also, in 2012 and 2018, the city of Plovdiv hosted the FISA World Rowing Championships. Another international sports event that was used to promote Bulgaria’s image was the ATP 250 tennis tournament Sofia Open, hosted in the Capital since 2016. Previously, between 2012 and 2014, the same city hosted a WTA tournament. The soft power of sport was recognized by some officials. “Conventional diplomacy, of course, is very important and decisive, but sport diplomacy also has great power and opportunities for influence. Such a strong tournament, Sofia Open, with good organisation, generates benefits for everyone. It is both a pleasure for lovers, an image, and inspires confidence”, explained Daniel Mitov, Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2014 and 2017.

Sport was used as a tool for diplomatic meetings when Bulgaria together with Romania, Serbia and Greece expressed their intention to host the 2030 World Cup. In Sofia, on 25 February 2019, ministers of sport from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Serbia agreed to submit a joint candidacy for this mega-event.

This kind of activity shows that the Bulgarian authorities are interested in hosting important sports events. Officials from Sofia publicly expressed their wish to host the 2014 Winter Olympics, but an official candidacy was not submitted. Bulgaria has focused on more realistic targets, such as the Winter Youth Olympics, and the city of Sofia applied to host the event in 2024, but lost to Gangwon.

3. WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT OF SPORT DIPLOMACY GOVERNANCE AND WHO ARE THE MAIN ACTORS?

There is no model of governance for sport diplomacy in Bulgaria, but if there was experts consider that it should be decentralized, given the specific nature of Bulgarian sport.

Each of these actors, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Youth and Sport could be relevant in the field of sport diplomacy, and this aspect was proven during the 1970s and 1980s, when Bulgaria was actively involved in initiatives that could be regarded as sport diplomacy. At that time, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had diplomats abroad, who were also responsible for sport, and they used sport in the field of international relations. The practice was considered successful, but changes in the political field caused sport diplomacy to disappear.

The Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is involved in some sport diplomacy activities. One of them is the organisation of a regular competition for diplomats in Bulgaria, called the Ambassadors League. Its main goal is to meet representatives of diplomatic missions and Bulgarian institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations on the ground. The event promotes sport as a mean of diplomacy for peace and understanding between nations.

Bulgarian diplomacy actions are rare in the field of sport. One episode that shows how political players in Bulgaria understand sport diplomacy was seen in April 2022, when Bulgarian President Rumen Radev visited Madrid. He met with Real Madrid president Florentino Perez and received a team jersey. A similar situation happened in 2018, when during the Rhythmic Gymnastics World Championships, IOC president Thomas Bach met the President of Bulgaria and the Minister of Youth and Sport.

Local authorities are involved in organising sports events. Some of them use the standard method and choose to financially support local volleyball or basketball teams and thus promote their city's image. Sofia is an exception, as it also uses a cultural approach. For example, Sofia was designated as the European Capital of Sport in 2018, and on this occasion, multiple activities attributable to sport diplomacy were organised. Sport as a cultural activity has been used by Sofia City Council on various occasions, like the 110th anniversary of the Spanish-Bulgarian relationship, in 2020, when sports events were organised around the Embassy of the Kingdom of Spain to the Republic of Bulgaria.

The media play a minor role in the sport diplomacy of Bulgaria and simply cover the events. “During the socialist period of Bulgaria, the media used to organise sporting events, but today, the media’s activity is just to report on an event”, said Teodor Borisov.

The private sector is not very visible and does not seem to be involved in sport diplomacy actions. However, there are some companies from Bulgaria that support sport, and a few of them are investing in sport to create an international image. For example, the Bulgarian betting company Efbet, which gives the name of the first football league, has entered other markets in the Balkan region. “The private sector is very important, and is more flexible than the government, but these companies are looking for their interest”, explains Teodor Borisov.

Athletes are the natural ambassadors of their sport, of their country, and of the European Union, considers Joanna Dochevska. Today, the most important figures of Bulgarian sport abroad are Grigor Dimitrov and Kubrat Pulev, but their private life has surpassed their performances in terms of notoriety. Recent performances of the Bulgarian athletes at the Tokyo Summer Olympics, where they won six medals, contributed to improving the image of the country.

Some organisations are aware of the importance of sport diplomacy and they are involved in projects of this type. The Bulgarian Sports Development Association was part of a European project on sport diplomacy and continues to dedicate activities to this topic. “Our organisation is a pioneer in this topic in Bulgaria. We are pleased to be innovative and to bring the topic to the table in Bulgaria; we have taken some very successful initiatives, like the Sport Diplomacy Academy, and we are trying to find different options to continue working on the topic because we believe it is truly important”, explains Joanna Dochevska.

The actions of the “Vasil Levski” National Sports Academy are along similar lines. “As a university, we use our students, who are former famous athletes, to present us all over the world, and at the same time we have activities which could be attributable to sport diplomacy, like partnerships with other institutions abroad”, explains Kornelyia Naidenova, professor at the academy. One example in this direction was the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and the Republic of South Korea, celebrated with tennis and Olympic taekwondo demonstrations at the “Vasil Levski” National Sports Academy in 2020.

The sports federations are important actors in Bulgaria, and they are most visible in sport diplomacy through their international connections.

4. TOOLS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY

The level of public economic resources available for sport diplomacy activities is non-existent, as the experts in the field see it. Apart from European funding, like Erasmus+ projects, at the national level, there is no money for sport diplomacy.

It is hard to measure the actions of sport diplomacy, but some activities attributable to sport diplomacy could be identified. Diplomatic and political efforts to attract mega-events are medium, but there is growing media coverage and international broadcasting, and a high rate of employment of high-profile sports people.

Sport diplomacy activities implemented in the country in collaboration with less developed countries are visible. Bulgaria is very well represented in this area because it is involved in many Balkan sports associations, in which it plays a leading role. As a result, multiple partnerships for competitions are possible. In collaboration with less developed countries, Bulgaria has some mentoring and training programmes, partnerships for competitions, funding for collaborative projects, and sports exchange programmes.

Very few sport diplomacy activities are implemented in Bulgaria with the aim of empowering sport diplomacy actors. In Bulgaria, training for diplomats and athletes is lacking, there are no dedicated resources and coordination tools, and monitoring and evaluation processes and political support are lacking.

The Sport Diplomacy Academy, mentioned above, could be considered the most important sport diplomacy activity in Bulgaria. The first edition of this event took place from 11-17 October 2019 in Sofia and brought together 80 sports administrators, coaches, and volunteers from four countries. Another important action was developed by the Bulgarian Rhythmic Gymnastics Federation in 2022, when the Russian war against Ukraine started. President Iliana Raeva invited the Ukrainian National Rhythmic Gymnastics Team to train in Bulgaria. Also, sport clubs from Bulgaria included Ukrainians in the sports system to ensure continuity, and in this case, diplomatic relations were important.

5. SPORT DIPLOMACY'S FUTURE

Considering that in Bulgaria, there have already been some sport diplomacy initiatives, like the Sport Diplomacy Academy project, there is a foundation for development in this direction. An opportunity for sport diplomacy activities in Bulgaria is the fact that the country has many well-known international athletes, such as Hristo Stoichkov (football), Vanja Gesheva-Tsvetkova (canoeing), Maria Grozdeva (shooting), Yordan Yovchev (Gymnastics), and Stefka Kostadinova (athletics) and they are considered symbolic ambassadors of the country. Also, some federations have strong connections at the regional and global level, like the Bulgarian Rhythmic Gymnastics Federation. This aspect could facilitate the organisation of major sports events in Bulgaria and the use of sport diplomacy. "Each actor and federation should have sport diplomacy as a tool to use in national and international activities, and as a country, we should have a coordination body for sport diplomacy overall", considers Joanna Dochevska.

A major weakness of sport diplomacy activities in Bulgaria is the presence of politics in sport, and the monopoly imposed by politicians leads to a misunderstanding and the misuse of the power of sport.

From this perspective, several disadvantages were mentioned by the Bulgarian side if the EU were to implement a common sport diplomacy policy. There is the risk of creating an imbalance between politics and athletes. A common policy must take into account the specific features of each country, something that is difficult to achieve politically, from the Bulgarian point of view. Also, financial support is usually not strictly controlled and the money provided to support sport is either redistributed or disappears in Bulgaria. The bureaucratic aspect is seen as a problem and this could lead to less concrete solutions.

If the EU were to have a common sport diplomacy policy, some advantages were identified, like the fact that it would strengthen EU foreign policy and the capacity of sports organizations and athletes, and it could bring a positive image of sport and greatly further the power of sport. At the same time, the activity of the leading countries would compensate for the passive attitude of countries like Bulgaria concerning global issues and sports problems.

In terms of good practices, Bulgarian experts have mentioned smaller countries, like Croatia and Slovenia, which use their diaspora for sport diplomacy purposes. Furthermore, countries like Hungary and Turkey are appreciated for their attention to sport. "Although widely criticized for their authoritarian rule, Viktor Orban and Recep Tayyip Erdogan have invested heavily in building sports facilities, including outside the country. The construction of stadiums and sports halls is a long-term investment and as long as it is implemented according to the needs of the

country, it can be taken as a positive example”, says Teodor Borisov. Germany was another example mentioned because it offers strong education for sport diplomacy, and alongside non-European countries, like the United States and Japan, it is considered a good example. China and Russia are seen as powers that have used sport diplomacy efficiently for a long time.

6. INTERVIEWS

- **Teodor Borisov:** Sports historian at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He is also a journalist and published a book on football history in Bulgaria.
- **Joanna Dochevska:** Chairwoman of the Bulgarian Sports Development Association. She was part of the “Sport Diplomacy Academy” project, co-founded by the European Union in 2019-2021. Details on: <https://www.eusportdiplomacy.info/>.
- **Korneliya Naidenova:** Associated Professor at the “Vassil Levski” National Sports Academy.

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