

NATIONAL REPORT



COUNTRY:
POLAND

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1. SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL SPORT SYSTEM/ARCHITECTURE

Elite sport and sport infrastructures fall under the Ministry of Sport and Tourism, which was created in 2005. Whereas the national sport system falls under the jurisdiction of the Polish Ministry of Sport and Tourism, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for public diplomacy and currently cites sport as a tool of soft power on its website. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, in post-communist Poland, cultural diplomacy became particularly politicised and started including sports-related matters in its public diplomacy strategy (Ociepka, 2021; Kobierecki et al., 2021).

The department within the ministry in charge of promoting Poland abroad was renamed Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy in 2008 (Ociepka, 2012). According to its definition of public diplomacy, the Ministry notably aims to promote Polish culture through the “conduct [of] ‘soft’ pressure on institutions and people who take decisions” (Ociepka, 2012).

The men’s European football championship (Euro) co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine in 2012 played a central role in Poland’s sport diplomacy as part of its broader public diplomacy strategy—it was described as “a great national celebration and proof that Poland belonged to the family of ‘modern’ nations” (Jaskulowski and Majewski, 2015). As it was preparing for the event, the prime minister at the time, Donald Tusk, emphasized the importance of sport in promoting Poland in front of the Polish parliament in 2007 (Kobierecki et al., 2021). The Ministry of Sport and Tourism even described the event as having a ‘Polish effect’, with reference to the acknowledged ‘Barcelona effect’ following that city’s hosting of the 1992 Summer Olympics, and resulting in “a strengthening of the image of Poland” and “a larger-than-expected increase in foreign tourism” (Kobierecki, 2021; Ministry of Sport and Tourism, 2012).

The term ‘sport diplomacy’ was mentioned in reports published by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2013 and 2016 (Koberecki et al., 2016). In 2021, sport diplomacy expert Michał Marcin Kobierecki explained that a clear strategy around sport diplomacy in Poland was still emerging (Kobierecki et al., 2021). The 2012 Euro remains the main accomplishment of Poland’s sport diplomacy strategy, while the Polish Olympic Committee has increasingly emerged as a key player in sport diplomacy activities.

Three recent examples of sport diplomacy activities include the ‘Sports UP Initiative’ by the United States embassy in Warsaw which aims to bring both countries closer together through sports (particularly American sports), and a 2021 contest around public diplomacy which enabled sports clubs wishing to develop projects aimed at strengthening Poland’s image to apply for grants. Following the Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, forms of aid provided by Poland included hosting Ukrainian athletes, sometimes organizing competitions in which they could participate.

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

Poland does not have a formalized sport diplomacy strategy, but it does have ad hoc activities integrated into government policies with clear tools and objectives. According to interviewees, the most important objectives are: improving Poland’s global reputation; creating business opportunities; and normalizing and/or reinforcing diplomatic relations.

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

The governance model among sport diplomacy actors in Poland is mostly decentralized. Different actors are in charge of specific programmes and resources, with the Ministry of Sport being a key player in the field. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is only relatively important. At a more local level, city authorities – including municipalities – and other local institutions engage in ad hoc activities and a few of them receive funds dedicated to sport diplomacy.

Whereas sports bodies are not highly involved in sport diplomacy, the Polish Olympic Committee was cited as a relevant player by all interviewees. Among other players that can be regarded as important actors in the field of sport diplomacy, the media does not particularly engage with sport diplomacy while the private sector and Polish athletes are involved on an ad hoc basis. Two other institutions mentioned by this report's interviewees – the Polish Cycling Federation and the University of Lodz – also engage in sport diplomacy activities on an ad hoc basis.

4. TOOLS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY

The public resources available for sport diplomacy activities were described as adequate by all interviewees with the exception of Grzegorz Botwina who described them as 'scarce'. Where there is investment in sport diplomacy it usually focuses on diplomatic and political efforts to attract mega-events. Other sport diplomacy-related activities such as employment of high-profile sports people or international broadcasting are yet to be fully implemented in Poland. The country does not engage in activities in collaboration with "emerging" countries but does rely on its Ministry of Sport and Tourism – in conjunction with sports bodies such as the Polish Olympic Committee – to use sport as a tool to promote international cooperation.

The most important sport diplomacy activities in Poland are centred on the hosting of mega-sports events, although the last mega-event was the UEFA Euro 2012.

5. SPORT DIPLOMACY'S FUTURE

Today, Poland lacks an independent strategy, and perceives sport diplomacy as a minor part of its broader public diplomacy. The lack of general awareness of the stakes of sport diplomacy and the limited resources available further limit sport-diplomacy-related activities in the country. On a more local level, sport diplomacy exists through grassroots activities and may be a good starting point for developing a distinct strategy in Poland.

According to the two interviewees working for the unnamed national NGO:

"The biggest challenge is to build a coherent strategy that would be sustained through a changing government, as well as the involvement of the private sector, especially now in a pandemic and war. When it comes to opportunities, an important aspect is the presence in the European Union, which opens the door to many possibilities."

At EU-level, different interests among states may present challenges to the implementation of a common sport diplomacy strategy, although this goal remains highly desirable according to the interviewees. Such a strategy could provide the necessary framework and funding that are currently missing at the national level, while enriching each participating country with valuable shared knowledge. For example, good practices of the cycling diplomacy initiative of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs could inspire other countries..

6. INTERVIEWS

- Grzegorz Botwina, President of the Polish Cycling Management and an Assistant Professor in Management at the Faculty of Management, University of Warsaw. He is also the president of the Institute for Sport Governance foundation
- Michał Marcin Kobierecki, Associate Professor at the University of Lodz and a national reference in the field of sport diplomacy.
- Two participants from a national sport non-governmental organisation also participated anonymously.

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