

NATIONAL REPORT



COUNTRY:
Romania

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1. SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL SPORT SYSTEM/ARCHITECTURE

Romanian sport is coordinated by the Ministry of Sports, which is responsible for the development and implementation of the sport policy established by the government. Its attributions are mentioned in the law no. 69/2000, and include the establishment of the sport strategy, initiation of projects, administration of sport facilities, representing Romania at the international level in sport matters, and collaborating with other institutions and organisations in the field of sport. The Ministry of Sports has 42 regional offices for sports and youth, corresponding to the 42 counties of Romania. Also, over 70 national sports federations are affiliated with this institution.

An important actor is the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee, which is responsible for Olympic sports and Olympic education. The Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee collaborates with the Ministry of Sports, which funds it. National sports federations are financed both by the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee, if they are Olympic federations, and by the Ministry of Sports.

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

Sport is an important area for the general public in Romania, and it was perceived distinctly by the political regimes. Until the fall of communism (1989), sport was a priority for the State and was used as a diplomatic tool. Romania hosted some international events, like the 1981 Universiades, and established relationships with countries including sports issues in official exchanges. For example, Romania received commercial facilities and sent sports experts to countries like Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Albania, and Syria (Constantin, 2020). Also, sport was used to celebrate international diplomatic relations.

Romania has never had a formalized national sport diplomacy strategy, but objectives that could be attributable to sport diplomacy are identifiable. Sport is considered an instrument to improve the country's reputation, promote the Romanian identity, and even develop business opportunities.

In many periods after 1989, officials were not interested in developing sport, and implicitly sport diplomacy. The opinion of Prime Minister Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, who said in 2005 that sport was not included in his 10 priorities, became famous and nationally debated (Buzarin, 2006). His successors were more sport-oriented, and sometimes demonstrated sport diplomacy actions. "Between 2007 and 2010, Romania manifested interest for sport diplomacy, and particularly for hosting important sports events", explains the sports historian Anita Sterea.

In the last 10 years, Romania has invested in facilities and hosted major sports events in Bucharest, Braşov, and Cluj-Napoca. For example, on 9 May 2012, the National Arena in Bucharest, inaugurated in 2011, organised the Europa League football final between Atletico Madrid and Athletic Bilbao. In 2013, Braşov hosted the European Youth Olympic Winter Festival. "This competition was a plus for Romania in terms of country branding, and also contributed to improving the infrastructure for some winter sports. It was an event conceived to help Romania in the long term to host the Winter Youth Olympic Games in 2020", says Anita Sterea.

The European Men's and Women's Artistic Gymnastics Individual Championships were held in April 2017 at the Polyvalent Hall in Cluj-Napoca. Euro 2020 matches were hosted in Bucharest and each of these events facilitated sport diplomacy dialogue through political meetings on the occasion of or before the event. Romanian officials from the political arena and federations have continued to regard hosting sports competitions as an important aspect and the country has bid for other sports events. In this vein, football was used as a tool for diplomatic meetings when Romania together with Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece expressed their intention to host the World Cup 2030 and signed an agreement for this.

Despite these highlights, experts note the lack of a coordinated strategy, perceived as an "illiteracy" in sport diplomacy. "We do not know how to use occasions given by the hosting of events in our country in terms of media, bilateral relations, we are not using those opportunities when our athletes are going for important competitions abroad, when we could send someone to make sport diplomacy", considers Elod Lajos Abraham. This aspect is explained by the lack of a broader vision because each sport or each federation is focused solely on its field.

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 Romania, but various actors are familiar with using sport diplomacy or have knowledge in this area. Even though the draft of the National Strategy for Sport of April 2022 made no mention of sport diplomacy, a former counsellor of the Ministry of Sports, Elod Lajos Abraham, stated that sport diplomacy would be included in the strategy (Strategia Națională pentru Sport, 2022). Organisational actors are interested in being involved in this field, but there is no coordinated process or any detailed written collaboration.

Some steps have been taken recently. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee signed a collaboration agreement for the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2021. The two institutions worked together for a common representation at the international level in the context of the mentioned events. "I have met diplomats, and politicians interested in being involved in sport diplomacy, but they were not very well connected with sports reality. They knew diplomacy, but they were not aware what type of product sport is and how to take advantage of this product internally or externally", says Elod Lajos Abraham. Robert Adam mentions that in some particular situations, diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were involved in actions specific to sport diplomacy.

Politicians are frequently associated with sports situations. For example, in 2021, Bucharest hosted the European Championship of the parliamentarians. The Romanian team won the tournament organised by the Romanian Football Federation. This institution is an important actor in Romanian sport diplomacy. Its president, Răzvan Burleanu, was a member of the High-Level Group on Sport Diplomacy created by Tibor Navracsics, in 2015-2016, and used this opportunity to improve his skills in the field and to make his organisation, the Romanian Football Federation, a visible actor abroad.

Local authorities are involved in organising sports events. From this perspective, Cluj-Napoca is competing with Bucharest and has become a serious rival for the Capital in this respect. In 2018, Cluj-Napoca became the European City of Sports, and from that moment, the local authorities promoted the idea that Cluj-Napoca is the Romanian Capital of Sport. "Local authorities have a

crucial role and, in this regard, Cluj-Napoca is a positive example, because it has built facilities, hosted some international events, it has a sport for all policy, and there is synergy between the private sector and public authorities, and this creates an area of expertise in Cluj-Napoca”, considers Robert Adam. On the other hand, Elod Lajos Abraham says that “some local authorities are doing sport diplomacy without knowing that they are. They do not know how to exploit such aspects, and this comes from a misunderstanding of sport diplomacy principles.”

The private sector is involved in sport diplomacy actions. Some projects initiated in Romania have grown at the international level. The Superkombat project initiated by Eduard Irimia became a worldwide event and was broadcasted on a large scale, in almost 100 countries. In the same way, the bicycle producer Pegas has become a continental brand. Some important companies, like Dedeman, Transilvania Bank, and Alexandrion are involved on a large scale in sport and they are associating their image with sport at the national level, but searching for athletes with international visibility.

Athletes are considered to be symbolic ambassadors of the country. The most important sports figures in Romania today are Simona Halep, former WTA leader, swimmers David Popovici and Robert Glință, and fencing champion Ana-Maria Brânză-Popescu. They have often been involved in meetings with a diplomatic character and have showed how their presence is a lubricant for international relations. For example, in 2014, Simona Halep received a diplomatic passport and the title of “Ambassador of Romanian tourism” from the Prime Minister. However, former athletes are used rarely as actors in sport diplomacy. An exception occurred in 2015, when the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, visited Bucharest and the Romanian Prime Minister invited former footballer Gheorghe Hagi, who played in Istanbul, to gift a T-shirt to the Turkish president.

The sports federations are important actors in Romania, and they are the most visible in sport diplomacy through their international implications. Some federations have an important place, like the Romanian Judo Federation, which has a central role in the International Judo Federation, because its president, Marius Vizer is Romanian.

4. TOOLS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY

The level of public economic resources available for sport diplomacy activities is non-existent because there is no policy in this area. Very few sport diplomacy activities are implemented in the country in collaboration with less developed countries. Romania has collaborations with the Republic of Moldova, based on the historical link between the two countries. In the same context, Romania has some mentoring and training programmes at the regional level.

Very few sport diplomacy activities are implemented in Romania with the aim of empowering sport diplomacy actors. The first major conference on this topic was organised in 2014 by the Student Sports Association. This event had three main topics, which reflect the sport diplomacy concerns of Romanian actors at that time: promoting Romania through sport, sports in universities and the private sector, and the role of athletes as vectors of image.

Another important project was organised in 2021. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee, and the Romanian Sportive Institute organised on 28 June-1 July 2021 the Diplomacy and Geopolitics of Sport training course. Forty participants attended this event which mainly aimed to familiarise them with sport diplomacy. Robert Adam was one of

the speakers at the event and explained that “the course wanted to raise awareness of this need and to avail people from the sports field and institutions to some basic competencies in terms of sport diplomacy.”

An earlier diplomatic action that involved sport in Romania was hosting the EU Sport Forum, on 8-9 April 2021, of the Education, Youth, Sport and Culture Department of the European Commission under the auspices of the rotational Council Presidency held by Romania. This event was an opportunity for athletes to meet with politicians and other officials to meet diplomats.

A more recent tool of sport diplomacy has been developed in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine. At the grassroots level, some actions to support Ukrainians have been started. Football clubs, the Romanian Football Federation, and municipalities have welcomed athletes and coaches since the first days of the military conflict.

5. SPORT DIPLOMACY'S FUTURE

“The biggest asset of Romanian sport diplomacy is the sports branding, because Romania has extensive expertise in this field”, comments Robert Adam. The general impression is that sport diplomacy in Romania has the potential to develop, considering the experience of some national federations and figures like Răzvan Burleanu, Octavian Morariu, and Mihai Covaliu. For this reason, the Romanian Football Federation and the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee could play a crucial role in sport diplomacy because they already have international connections. “Those relations made through the Romanian Olympic Committee have great validity and importance”, considers Elod Lajos Abraham. The problem is that these officials have not transferred their knowledge to the lower levels of sports administration or to other institutions that could be interested in sport diplomacy.

One opportunity for sport diplomacy activities in Romania is the fact that the country has many well-known international athletes, like Gheorghe Hagi (footballer), Nadia Comăneci (Gymnastics), Ecaterina Szabo (Gymnastics), Ilie Năstase (tennis), Ion Țiriac (tennis), and others who are considered symbolic ambassadors of the country.

Some national federations have strong connections at the regional and global level, and they could use their position to promote sport diplomacy actions. This aspect is related to the organisation of major competitions in Romania, which are also opportunities to plan sport diplomacy activities.

A major weakness of sport diplomacy activities is the lack of credibility of the Ministry of Sport, caused by frequent changes, political influence and lack of vision. These aspects prevent a continuous connection with other actors when it comes to sport diplomacy. Similarly, ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education, or Ministry of Health, do not see sport diplomacy as a priority and the lack of experts in this area makes it difficult to set priorities along these lines. “Structured competencies at the level of public authorities in the field of sport diplomacy need to be created”, says Robert Adam.

If the EU were to have a common sport diplomacy policy, disadvantages identified by Romanian experts relate to national identity and the fact that the EU only has supporting competences in the field of sport, therefore each country implements its own national policy, which will make it difficult to structure coordination. In this regard, the interviewees expect that some EU countries will not accept a common policy. At the same time, the lack of specialists in sport diplomacy in many EU countries will create a problem in terms of implementation. There will also be the problem of financing such a project because it would require significant resources and would also need to integrate the sport diplomacy policy in the EU external action.

If the EU were to have a common sport diplomacy policy, some advantages were identified, such as professional expertise in the field, resulting from the unified action of all the actors across Europe, together with powerful sports branding in Europe, and the benefit for sport, which is at a high level and in multiple areas, from grassroots to research, marketing, and sport performance.

In terms of good practices, the Romanian experts mentioned France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and also Hungary, even though on Hungary the opinions are mixed, considering that the Hungarian government invests in Romanian sport, supporting sports entities from the region with a Magyar ethnic majority.

6. INTERVIEWS

- **Elod Lajos Abraham:** former counsellor for two ministries of sport, expert in sport policies.
- **Robert Adam:** diplomat, former director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Brussels, guest lecturer at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Bucharest, PhD in political sciences from the Free University of Brussels.
- **Anita Sterea:** Lecturer at the Romanian Olympic Academy and at the Faculty of History (University of Bucharest).

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