

NATIONAL REPORT



COUNTRY:
SLOVAKIA

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1. SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL SPORT SYSTEM/ARCHITECTURE

Slovakian sport is coordinated by the State Secretariat for Sport, which is a subdivision of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport. This branch is responsible for planning strategies for sports and youth, with the aim of creating a favourable context for sports and physical activity at the national level. The activity of the aforementioned ministry in the field of sport is stipulated by Law no. 440/2015. The main directions of the law include the promotion and development of sport for all and performance sports in the Slovak Republic and the protection of the integrity of sport. The conception of Sport has two strategic objectives: a healthy and active society; and the successful representation of Slovakia.

The Slovakian Olympic and Sports Committee also plays an important role in Slovakian sport. Created in 1993, this organization has connections with the national sports federations, which are responsible for training, competitions, and the development of their sports activity. The Slovakian Olympic and Sports Committee is also responsible for over 20 regional Olympic clubs and promotes education through the Slovak Olympic Academy.

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

Sport is considered an important element of the Slovakian identity. The most popular sports are ice hockey, football, cycling, tennis, volleyball, swimming, ski sports, and snowboarding. During the interwar period, sports were used by Czechoslovakia for diplomatic purposes, but the split of the country into two states changed the strategy of the Czech Republic and Slovakian authorities in this area.

Slovakia does not have a formalized national sport diplomacy strategy, but some objectives that could be attributable to sport diplomacy are visible. The Slovakian authorities are seeking to improve the country's reputation through sport at a global level; they promote the Slovakian identity in connection with some sports performances, but also with the sports facilities that the country offers; and they use sports to improve diplomatic relations with other countries. "Sport diplomacy in our country is connected with the public policy goal of sports representation and also with sporting integrity", explains Jozef Kučera.

In practical terms, Slovakia has sought to promote its winter tradition and organise the Winter Olympics. The Slovakian Olympic and Sports Committee applied to host the 2006 Winter Olympics at Poprad-Tatra but lost to Turin. This candidacy, like a similar intention in 2002, helped Slovakia to gain visibility at the international level. The country prepared for these candidacies by hosting the 4th Winter European Youth Olympic Days (EYOD) in Poprad-Tatra in 1999.

In addition to the aforementioned events, Slovakia hosted other major international events with a diplomatic character, like the Seminar of the Chefs de Missions for the 2000 Olympic Games and Secretaries-General of the European National Olympic Committees in Bratislava in 1998. The country also hosted the General Assembly of the European Fair Play Movement and the 4th European Fair Play Conference in 2001.

One of the biggest sports events hosted by Slovakia is probably the IIHF World Championship, that the country has organised twice. In 2011 and 2019, the most important countries in ice hockey battled for the title in Slovakia. A similar situation was in canoe slalom. Bratislava hosted

the 2011 and 2021 ICF Canoe Slalom World Championships. Also, in 2012, Slovakia organised the 19th Biathlon European Championships in Osrblie. In terms of international events, the annual road cycling Tour of Slovakia is an important competition with global visibility and in which some of the top cyclists take part.

Sport diplomacy is used by Slovakia to build good international relationships and the most relevant case in this regard is the relationship with the Czech Republic. The two countries have common activities in the field of sport diplomacy. For example, in 2017, the Czech Olympic Committee and the Slovak Olympic and Sports Committee prepared a sports diplomacy educational programme for those interested, as a part of a Dual Career project, which helps athletes ensure a smooth transition from a sports career to diplomacy. Two years later, experts from the two countries organised a summer school on sport diplomacy in Pilsen. Also, bilateral sports competitions are organised.

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 Slovakia, but sport diplomacy is an important topic for the Slovakian authorities. The theme of sports diplomacy was promoted by the Slovak presidency in the Council of the EU in 2016 and this confirmed that it was a subject at the national level in Slovakia. Some institutional actors are interested in developing this field.

The most important are the State Secretariat for Sport, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Slovakian Olympic and Sports Committee. They are collaborating to promote Slovakian interests in the field of sports. Also, with the help of the tourism division, Slovakia has been promoted as a friendly country and sports nation through videos that have been broadcast on Eurosport over the last 10 years. These campaigns aimed to introduce Slovakia to the general public in over 50 countries and reach out to millions of viewers.

Local authorities are key actors involved in organising sports events. Bratislava, Kosice, Banská Bystrica, and Poprad-Tatra are the most active in this respect. Another important actor in sport diplomacy is the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. Since 2012, this institution has regularly organised a series of conferences entitled Významné športové udalosti z pohľadu športovej diplomacie [Significant Sports Events from the Perspective of Sport Diplomacy]. The goal is to highlight the potential of sport in Slovakia and to explore the mutual interconnectedness of sport, diplomacy, and politics (Zákravský et al., 2021).

The private sector is trying to be visible, and various companies from Slovakia are associating their image with that of former athletes. One example is the Audi branch in Slovakia, which signed a contract with Olympic champion Petra Vlhová. Betting companies are also very active and visible.

Athletes, former athletes, and coaches are empowered with a sport diplomacy role in Slovakia. Some of them hold public positions and use their social capital to promote Slovakian interests. For example, Ivan Husar, the state secretary for sport, was the coach of the national men's volleyball team. Former Top 10 ATP player Karol Kučera has been a member of the Slovak Parliament since 2020 and is plenipotentiary commissioner of the Slovakian government for youth and sports.

Various organisations are aware of the importance of sport diplomacy and they are involved in projects of this type. For example, in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, many NGOs and clubs from Slovakia registered hundreds of athletes from Ukraine to help in their training process in Slovakia. Similarly, hundreds of children from Ukraine play sports in Slovakia in various school sports clubs and sports organisations.

The national sports federations are important actors in Slovakia and some of them are active within international federations, like the Slovak Ice Hockey Federation

4. TOOLS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY

The degree of knowledge of sport diplomacy in Slovakia has increased in the last two decades through the involvement of the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, which has started to develop this field of study in collaboration with other organisations and institutions (Zákravský et al., 2021). One example of such collaboration is The Agreement on Cooperation signed in 2017 by the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy of Matej Bel University and the Slovakian Olympic and Sports Committee.

Some former athletes, like Danka Bartekova, who has been a member of the International Olympic Committee since 2013, have specialised in sport diplomacy and their involvement in this field is a key tool for increasing Slovakia's visibility at the international level.

Alongside the human resources and academic interest in sport diplomacy, Slovakia constantly improves its sports facilities, enabling the country to bid to host major events. In this respect, the level of public economic resources available for sport in general and sport diplomacy, in particular, is increasing.

5. SPORT DIPLOMACY'S FUTURE

Slovakia has many former athletes well-known at the international level, like the biathlete Anastasiya Kuzmina, ice hockey players Miroslav Šatan and Martin Štrbák, footballers Miroslav Karhan, Marek Mintal, Ľubomír Moravčík, and Stanislav Šesták, the white-water slalom paddlers, twins Peter and Pavol Hochschorner, Michal Martikán and Elena Kaliská, the road racing cyclist Ján Svorada and many others whose celebrity could help to develop sport diplomacy in Slovakia.

One major weakness of sport diplomacy activities in Slovakia is the lack of attention paid to sport diplomacy considering the human potential and the role that Slovakia could play in hosting winter sports events. Sports like ice hockey, road cycling, tennis, skiing disciplines, and canoe slalom are vectors of development for sport diplomacy in Slovakia.

Some opportunities could be used by Slovakia to increase its involvement at the international level. One example is the 16th Summer European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), organised by Banská Bystrica in 2022. Over 3,600 athletes from 50 countries are expected to compete in this event which will be an important experience for Slovakia and give the country visibility.

A few disadvantages were mentioned by the Slovakian respondents if the EU were to implement a common sport diplomacy policy. The most important is the influence of politics that could suffocate sports. Other aspects are the usage of sport diplomacy in global politics and the misrepresentation of sports activities. If the EU were to have a common sport diplomacy policy, advantages identified by the Slovakian officials are social inclusion, the connection of sports

policies from different countries, supporting a healthy lifestyle across Europe, sport diplomacy exchanges, and the expansion and applicability of sport diplomacy to other fields, such as business.

In terms of good practices, the Slovakian expert mentioned the United Kingdom, and Ukraine, and more precisely the Klitschko brothers' actions in the context of the war started by Russia. In one way or another, each country is involved in sport diplomacy, considers Jozef Kučera.

6. INTERVIEWS

- **Jozef Kučera:** Head State Counsellor - Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic .

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