

NATIONAL REPORT



COUNTRY:
Slovenia

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1. SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL SPORT SYSTEM/ARCHITECTURE

Slovenia is a small, young country and according to the definition on the Official website of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union it is one of the “Top countries in terms of the number of medals won at the Olympics per capita”. The success of Slovenian athletes in the world demonstrates how sports-oriented Slovenia really is.

The Slovenian sport system is built around the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport and the Foundation of Sport. Each area of the Ministry (education, science, and sport) works in consultation with specific professional boards interested in different topics. In the field of sports, the main topics are professional and recreational sport, sport for all and the historical legacy of “rehabilitation”. The sport board has 17 members (9 nominated by the Government, 6 from the IOC, 1 from the Paralympic Committee, 1 from Sport University). The challenge for the Slovenian Ministry is its broad scope: it must deal with science education and sports at all levels (from primary school to university, from grassroots activity to agonistic sport).

Sport is viewed as a tool for cooperation between the Ministry of Sport, Ministry of the Economy and the Tourist Board, and the Public Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for the Marketing and Promotion of Tourism.

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

There is no formalized national sport diplomacy strategy, but Slovenian athletes make an important contribution to the visibility and the identity of the country. “Slovenian Diplomacy is stronger through sport than through politicians.” “There could be a new beginning, thanks to the shift of the Department of Sports from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of the Economy, with more resources for Diplomacy and probably also a greater investment in sport diplomacy.”

The most relevant objectives of Slovenian Sport Diplomacy are the improvement of the country’s global reputation, nation-branding and the opportunities to promote business. This is clear in the marketing project of the Tourist Board presenting Slovenia as the perfect place to host training for overseas athletes thanks to the excellence of research in the field of Sport Science.

Sport diplomacy is also an important tool for reinforcing diplomatic relations and promoting the value of sport. Slovenia demonstrated the relevance of its role during the Presidency of the European Council which led to the resolution of a European Model of Sport (30 November 2021): *“The adoption of the Resolution on the European Model of Sport is a valuable achievement for sport in Europe and at the same time a remarkable success for the Slovenian Presidency. The model emphasizes values in sport such as justice, solidarity, good governance, human rights, and the voice of sportsmen in all sports organizations. Today, we have advocated for sport that inspires and brings people together, for sport that includes and is and will be accessible to all, at all levels.”* (Simona Kustec, Minister of Education, Science and Sport).

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

Sport diplomacy is considered to fall within the Public and Economic Diplomacy unit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This approach is based on a flexible structure including research centres, Universities and experts nominated by the Government. Dialogue between the board of experts and the Government can be challenging (for example: during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a heated debate over the reopening of skiing activities).

There is a lack of agreement within the Government on the perception of the role of the players and the coordination of all SD actors and activities. It depends on the function of the stakeholder we interviewed. According to diplomats from the Government or Olympic Committee, sport diplomacy is a specific strategy in the Unit of Diplomacy of the Foreign Affairs Ministry. According to those working at the Ministry of Education and Science as experts, the most important role in sport diplomacy is covered by the Ministry of Education and by institutions such as Universities, Research centres and the Foundation for Sport which funds research, professional support, and programmes for children.

The National Olympic Committee is above all a key player for promoting Slovenia and its economic potential through major sports events and grassroots activities. The engagement of official diplomats depends on their personal priorities, interest, and knowledge of how to use sport diplomacy as a convenient tool, but they are not trained in a wide-open strategy. The Olympic Committee promotes collaboration between sports bodies from different countries and uses sport diplomacy in various areas. The organisation of Mega Events could be an important tool for improving sport diplomacy even though it is difficult for a small country like Slovenia to host them (there was a project for a Slovenian, Austrian and Italian bid for the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games but no agreement was reached).

The role of local institutions is based on *ad hoc* engagement according to the opportunity of receiving funds, for example projects of town twinning through sport or the organisation of international events (marathons, cycling, basketball). Collaboration with international events is worth noting: the Slovenian stage of the Giro d'Italia is an opportunity for the country, where cycling is one of the most popular activities, as was with the 2019 CEV for volleyball movement.

The involvement of sports bodies in sport diplomacy strategies is linked to the National Olympic Committee. An interesting project is the participation of sports bodies in the organisation of a National Sports Day to involve the general population in grassroots activity. The larger federations, such as football and basketball, are engaged in economic opportunities thanks to the presence of high-level Slovenian players abroad (Luca Doncic, NBA-Dallas Mavericks; Jan Oblak, Atlético Madrid).

The country's media do not directly engage in sport diplomacy actions, although they contribute to the promotion of Slovenia through reports on top, internationally famous athletes and report on achievements of sport diplomacy if they occur. National media developed a project to raise awareness of sports activity among young people through a training programme linked to basketball.

The private sector is a relevant player for creating opportunities and growing economic interest. The traditional contribution is through the sponsorship of athletes, and many private companies in the sports sector also stand out with excellent products. This is the result of knowledge

and its application to sport (such as Elan and Slatmar, producers of the most widely used ski bindings in the World Cup circuit). Companies developing devices useful to sport have access to Government funding for research, if it is recognised as valid.

Top athletes provide testimonials and contribute to building the Identity of the Country abroad: Tadei Pogcar (the youngest Tour de France winner, 2020 – 2021); Primoz Roglic, (Gold medal chrono in 2021, Vuelta, Tour de France 2° in 2020); Janja Garnbret (world's best climber), Jan Oblak (Atlético Madrid goalkeeper). Thanks to Luca Doncic (NBA, Dallas Mavericks), the "I feel Slovenian" night was organised in Dallas as a partnership between the team and the Slovenian Tourist Board, to increase the visibility of the country.

Top athletes themselves are not directly engaged in SD strategy but they are important ambassadors, proud of their country and *"have been inspiring Slovenians to spend their free time actively"* (I feel Slovenian, Public Tourist Board). Furthermore, there is a Dual Career programme to professionalise athletes after their athletic careers.

Dialogue between the different stakeholders engaged in the Slovenian sport system is not easy because experts from research centres and universities struggle to find answers from the political world. Therefore, coordination is not easy, especially because there is no well-defined sport diplomacy project. The Olympic Committee is the best structure to conduct dialogue with a view to improving the entire sports movement as an opportunity for sport diplomacy.

4. TOOLS OF SPORT DIPLOMACY

There is no global strategy or budget for sport diplomacy although it is included in general Diplomacy activities. The most important activity in terms of sport diplomacy is the implementation nation-branding.

The different point of view between the Ministry or the Olympic Committee and the board of expert consultants is clear: to the Ministry, the sport diplomacy challenge is the organisation of Mega Events to improve National Branding and partnerships for competitions, to the experts Slovenia is too small to host mega events and if there is the capacity, the Government budget allocated for them is too small. In their opinion, a sport diplomacy strategy useful to international relationships could be based on specific research activity applied to sport, as a tool for all high-level athletes in the world (for example research on injury prevention through Artificial Intelligence).

Sport fellowship schemes and grants are also important projects in which all the organisations are involved (Ministry, Board of Experts and Olympic Committee) with particular attention paid to Erasmus+ projects and International Cooperation Programmes (such as "Sixteen plus China" in which Slovenian was responsible for winter sports) as an opportunity to share experiences at international level.

5. SPORT DIPLOMACY'S FUTURE

The major weaknesses of the country's sport diplomacy strategy are the lack of dedicated programmes, personnel, and funds. The activities are not integrated into a global perspective that includes sport diplomacy as a key tool to help achieve different goals that are important for the country or for a wider region. Sport diplomacy's main asset is the quality of scientific research applied to sport which allows the training of high-level athletes and can add value abroad. The

organisation of International Events could certainly be an important tool for improving the identity of Slovenia as a sporting country.

Furthermore, organising a sporting embassy in the form of a National Hospitality House at the Olympic Games allowed Slovenia to establish a platform during recent Olympic and Games. Equally, the nation has promoted the active participation of sport officials in executive bodies of international sports organisations.

The first steps should be to build a national sport diplomacy policy and implement it, and establish a practical structure to oversee it, including appropriate training for colleagues.

A common EU sport diplomacy policy presents challenges in sharing experiences to improve cooperation among countries and a boost for less developed countries. Nonetheless, a common approach might also be an important tool for improving EU branding, financial and human resources, and larger impact due to economies of scale.

Potential disadvantages stem from the lack of coherence among EU Member States, a different understanding of what Sport Diplomacy is and diversity at the national level. Smaller countries would lose some of their advantages compared to larger ones, due to the diversity of approaches to solving specific diplomatic issues, in a slow and complex decision-making process.

A European Sport Model should be a significant part of EU Sport Diplomacy as it includes values and respects for human rights, athletes' rights and solidarity (see Council Resolution on the key features of a European Sport Model of November 2021).

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