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## Sport and foreign policy during the communist regime

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TACȘA ANDREEA-MARIA

PETRU MAIOR FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND LETTERS, SL 2 DEPARTMENT

**Summary:** Sport in Romania and foreign policy are two areas which, although seemingly distinct, intersect in significant ways, especially through the prism of sports diplomacy. Sport was used as a tool to promote the country's image on the international scene, strengthening bilateral relations and contributing to Romania's soft- power. In this article, I set out to highlight how sport was the main pawn of political promotion abroad.

**Keywords:** *sport, political promotion, foreign policy.*

### INTRODUCTION

Sport was seen as a platform through which the regime could demonstrate the effectiveness of its political system. The performances of athletes from the Eastern Bloc, including Romania, were used to emphasize the superiority of the socialist regime over the West. These achievements were widely promoted as a symbol of the success of communism.

The Romanian Communist Party (PCR) used sport as an essential foreign policy tool, especially during the regime of Nicolae Ceausescu. In the context of the Cold War, sport was a significant platform for promoting Romania's image internationally. The PCR saw sport as an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of the Romanian communist system and to promote a foreign policy autonomous from the direct influence of Moscow.

After the 1968 break with the line imposed by the Soviet Union, Ceausescu sought to assert Romania's independence, and the success of Romanian athletes was used to legitimize this position.

The communist regime used sport to convey the image of a strong and unified society. International sporting success was often associated with the regime's achievements. International competitions, such as the Olympic Games or World Championships, were also opportunities to show the "superiority" of socialist regimes over capitalist ones. Athletes from communist countries were often seen as "national heroes" and were used to strengthen the image of the regime.

The communist regime established a rigorous system of sports selection and training. Talented children were identified from an early age and integrated into specialized training centres. Training was intense and performance was measured in terms of a "contribution to national glory". In Romania, for example, "centers of excellence" were created where athletes trained under the supervision of experienced coaches and were supported by the state, both financially and logistically.

World Championships were used to show the strength and success of the regime.

Athletes under communist regimes were sent to international competitions to boost the prestige of the regime. For example, Romania, as part of the Eastern Bloc, sent athletes to international competitions as part of a wider plan to increase political influence. Their performances at the Olympic Games or World Championships were seen not only as personal achievements, but also as a way to promote the positive image of the regime.

They received considerable financial support from the state, but this was conditional on their performance. Training was supported by the state, and sports infrastructure was also modernized, especially in the capitals and big cities.

Athletes' personal lives were also often influenced by the totalitarian regime. Many athletes were forced to follow a strict schedule, which included not only training, but also rehearsing for various public events, promoting the regime's image or even international promotional trips.

Athletics, gymnastics, football and hockey were areas where Romania excelled. Medals won by Romanian athletes at the Olympic Games or World Championships were used to show the strength and success of the regime.

The most widespread means of propagandizing the communist regime was the results obtained at the Olympic Games, which increased Romania's prestige worldwide.

Romanian athletes who are successful internationally often become ambassadors for the country, and are a vector for Romania's image in the world. They are considered symbols of national values and identity.

Nadia Comăneci, Ilie Năstase, Gheorghe Hagi, are just a few of the athletes who have been extremely influential in promoting Romania's image internationally. Their success has helped consolidate the country's prestige on the world sporting map.

Romania made significant progress in sport during Nicolae Ceausescu's time in power between 1965 and 1989, which was reflected in outstanding performances at the Olympic Games. In the four editions held during this period - Montreal 1976, Moscow 1980, Los Angeles 1984 and Seoul 1988 - Romanian athletes achieved outstanding results, consistently ranking among the top ten nations in the world.

The communist regime particularly supported sports where outstanding international performances could be achieved. These included individual sports such as gymnastics, athletics, weightlifting, swimming and wrestling, but also team sports such as football and handball. Gymnastics, for example, was a very successful discipline for Romania during the communist period, and Romanian athletes won many Olympic and world medals.

Nadia Comăneci became a world legend and a symbol of the success of the communist regime with her 7 A's at the 1976 Olympic Games. Similar gymnastics victories were achieved by other sportswomen such as Ecaterina Szabo and Teodora Ungureanu.

Nicolae Ceausescu's regime had a profound impact on Nadia Comăneci's career and life. The Romanian Olympic Committee and the Romanian state invested heavily in gymnastics, and Nadia was considered an "ambassador" of the communist regime, being supported financially and organizationally to become a world champion. At the time, Romanian gymnasts benefited from rigorous preparation and training conditions, as well as some pressure from the authorities to bring home medals that reflected the regime's success.

Nadia came to international attention in 1976 at the Montreal Olympics, when she achieved the first perfect 10 in the history of Olympic gymnastics, a performance that sparked a real buzz and strengthened Romania's image in the world. This achievement had a considerable impact, not only in the field of sport, but also in international politics, given that Romania was a socialist country under communist rule.

Nadia was also under strict surveillance by the authorities at the time. Her career was closely linked to the imagination and manipulation of the communist regime. As Nadia became better known, the Romanian state used her achievements to promote the regime's image internationally. Sport was seen by the communist regime as a means to improve the country's prestige in the capitalist world and to showcase the achievements of socialism. In this context, Nadia and other athletes were often treated as "products" of the state, and their achievements were used to support communist ideology.

Romanian athletes also excelled in other sports such as swimming, rowing, handball and wrestling. In these fields, Romania won many medals at international competitions.

Many football clubs were associated with state institutions, such as Steaua Bucharest (military apparatus) and Dinamo Bucharest (Ministry of Interior). These teams benefited from considerable financial and administrative resources. Other long-established clubs, such as Rapid or Universitatea Cluj, were marginalized because they did not have direct links with the power institutions.

The communist regime used the performances of Romanian teams to show the superiority of the regime. Stele Bucharest's success in the 1986 European Champions Cup was presented as a triumph of the Nicolae Ceausescu regime. Players were often transformed into symbols of patriotism and devotion to the regime. Players like Gheorghe Hagi, Ilie Balaci and Helmuth Duckadam became legends of Romanian football. Footballers who wished to play abroad were often prevented from leaving until a certain age (usually 28) so as not to "leave their homeland."

After 1989, the influence of politics on football decreased and clubs had to adapt to the market economy. However, many believe that the communist period left deep marks on the organization and mentality of Romanian sport.

At the same time, the communist regime built sports facilities and athletics tracks, but also in supporting sports science, such as sports medicine and advanced training methods. However, sometimes the training methods were excessive, focused on performance at any cost. Iolanda Balaş, Maricica Puică and Doina Melinte are the most important personalities in Romanian athletics who won gold medals at the 1960, 1964 and 1984 Olympic Games. Although they achieved notable performances, there were suspicions of the use of doping substances to obtain better results, a phenomenon also seen in other communist countries. Performance was often achieved under intense pressure.

The sport of wrestling, both Greco-Roman and freestyle, has been another discipline in which Romania has been consistently successful. Romanian wrestlers such as Nicolae Martinescu and Ioan Silvăşan won medals at various Olympic Games.

Romania has also excelled in weightlifting, where Romanian athletes have won numerous gold, silver and bronze medals at the Olympic Games and World Championships, with notable examples such as Ivan Ghiţă and Toma Bălescu.

Romania achieved excellent results in rowing, where Romanian teams, especially in the 8 or 4 rowing events, won numerous gold and silver medals.

Athletes under the communist regime were not only athletes but also active members of the political system. Their careers were often influenced by party loyalty. Many athletes had the status of "professional workers" and were integrated into party structures or communist youth organizations. The fact that an athlete won medals at international competitions was used as a way of promoting communist ideology, and the regime made sure that they behaved according to the ideological norms it imposed. Elite athletes enjoyed certain privileges such as access to rare goods, better housing and social prestige. In return, they were closely monitored by the Securitate and had to maintain an image in line with the regime's values.

Athletes were seen as tools of political propaganda. When an athlete managed to win an Olympic medal, this victory was used to reinforce the legitimacy of the regime and communist ideology. However, athletes who failed to perform to expectations were often considered a "national disgrace" and the pressure on them was immense.

Sport was also used to show the superiority of the communist system over the West. During the Cold War, the Olympic Games became an arena of ideological competition, and the success of communist athletes against Western ones was seen as proof of the regime's efficiency and power.

Romanian athletes sometimes chose to stay abroad during competitions, fleeing the communist regime. Famous cases include footballers such as László Bölöni or gymnasts who chose not to return home.

Another form of foreign propaganda was the attempt to support less developed countries both materially and with specialists. For example, only in 1973, with the approval of the C.C.C. of the P.C.C.R. (A.N.R., Fond CC of the PCR, Propaganda and Agitation Section, file 3/1973), the C.N.E.F.S. sent several coaches, from disciplines where Romanian athletes were achieving good

results internationally, to countries with less tradition in practicing the respective sports: Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Albania, Syria, Upper Volta, Libya.

In 1973, (A.N.R., Fonds CC of the PCR, Propaganda and Agitation Section, file 3/1973) Fernard Sastre, president of the French Football Federation, wrote to N. Ceaușescu asking him to intervene with "the Romanian sports authorities to allow the arrival in France of Mr. Stefan Kovacs and to strengthen the friendly relations between our two countries".

In 1977, Nicolae Ceaușescu personally, while watching the competition on television, ordered the withdrawal of the women's gymnastics team from the European Championships in Prague. This was because of the abuses committed by the refereeing brigades against the Romanian gymnasts in order to favor the Soviet delegation, which "had" to show the world that the Soviet Union was "the leading country in sport" through the results obtained by its athletes. (Kukuskin G.L., 1955) The process of formation of international sports structures began in the second half of the 19th century, diversified in the inter-war period and intensified after World War II (Matache C., 2006).

International sports structures under the communist regime were also used as a propaganda tool, with national prestige often placed before sport itself. Sport was subordinated to state ideology and participation in international competitions had clear political goals. The first Romanian sports structures became affiliated to specialized international bodies in the first part of the last century, but Romania did not join the entire international competition system until the 50s.

Between the 1950s and the 1980s, Romanian athletes took part in competitions reserved for athletes from socialist countries, which were organized according to the rules of international sports federations: the military spartachiades organized in rotation in the member countries under the aegis of the Sports Committee of the Friendly Armies (CSAP) based in Moscow; spartachiades of athletes belonging to the clubs of the Ministries of the Interior, also called "Dinamoviade"; spartachiades of athletes belonging to the clubs of the craft cooperative system, competitions of trade union clubs, competitions of railwaymen from the socialist countries.

Since 1986, Romanian athletes have participated, on the basis of nominal invitations, alongside the best athletes in the world, in the "Goodwill Games", a multi-sport competition between the USA and the USSR (Russia), organized every four years, in rotation, in the middle of the Olympic cycle. The competition was the result of the loosening of Soviet-American relations after Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to the Soviet leadership (1985). The involvement of Romania, through its athletes, in this sporting competition was a desperate measure by Nicolae Ceaușescu to mitigate his political isolation from both Moscow and Washington.

The most powerful blow to the Ceaușescu regime's image in the West was linked to sport. This was Romania's non-alignment with the boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, a decision accepted by all the other communist bloc states at Moscow's express request (Hoberman J, 1990).

On July 28, 1984, at the Colosseum Stadium in Los Angeles, during the opening ceremony of the XXIII edition of the Olympic Games, the Romanian delegation was given a particularly warm welcome by the 92,655 spectators. Apart from the host country team, the Romanian delegation was the most cheered delegation (Alexandrescu H, 1985).

This was part of a wider boycott organized by the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc states in response to the United States-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. The New York Times (quoted in ProSport, July 17, 2009) reported in July 2008 that the US had paid \$39 120 000 to Romania not to join the boycott of other communist countries in support of its participation in the Los Angeles Olympics (Pro Sport, 2009).

The 1984 boycott was coordinated by the Soviet Union, which invited several Warsaw Pact countries (including Romania) and other communist countries not to participate in the competitions

in Los Angeles. The reasons cited were security concerns and the alleged politicization of the 1984 Olympics, as well as dissatisfaction with US foreign policy.

Romania, led at the time by Nicolae Ceausescu, chose not to participate in the boycott imposed by the Soviet Union, and Romanian teams took part in the 1984 Olympics. Romania won 53 medals at those Games, including 20 gold, 16 silver and 17 bronze, making it one of the countries that performed remarkably well.

Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) at the time, honored Ceaușescu with the Olympic Order, a prestigious distinction awarded for outstanding contributions to the Olympic movement. Samaranch later made it clear that this decoration was not a gesture of support for Ceaușescu's authoritarian regime, but a recognition of his decision to participate in the Games, which had positive implications for the future of Olympism.

After the 1989, Revolution and the fall of the communist regime, Samaranch emphasized that the awarding of the Olympic Order was not related to Romania's domestic politics, but to its role in ensuring a more balanced participation in the Olympic Games, mitigating the effects of the Eastern boycott.

## CONCLUSION

Sport in Romania has been and continues to be an effective means of political propaganda. From the consolidation of the communist regime to gaining popular support in the post-1989 democracy, sport provides a platform for politicians to influence public opinion and associate their image with national success.

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## Author presentation

After completing master's studies, I was admitted to the Interdisciplinary Doctoral School in Brasov ,in September 2022.

As a PhD student in the discipline of physical education and sport, my goal is to improve the motor and functional ability of students from non-professional specializations as well as to teach the practical elements of basic gymnastics and acrobatics to students from the specialization of physical education and sport.

For the discipline of Physical Education, together with my colleagues, I would like to lay the foundations for new sports disciplines that will attract as many students as possible in this field.