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## **SPORTS DIPLOMACY OF NORWAY**

**ABSTRACT:** Norway is perceived as a country with a clear international identity. The aim of the article is to investigate the sports diplomacy of Norway and to examine its influence on the international brand of this country. The author will define the term “sports diplomacy” and attempt to outline the strategy of Norway’s public diplomacy; an analysis of the methods used in Norwegian sports diplomacy will follow. The main hypothesis of this paper is that sports diplomacy only plays a subsidiary role in Norwegian nation branding.

**KEYWORDS:** Sports diplomacy, public diplomacy, nation branding, international image of Norway

### **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to investigate the sports diplomacy of Norway. The definition of sports diplomacy will be discussed below, but in short, the term refers to using sport as a means to achieve diplomatic or foreign policy goals. One of these objectives is to influence the international image of a country, which aligns sports diplomacy with public diplomacy. Therefore, before analysing particular examples of Norway’s sports diplomacy, the article examines its public diplomacy strategies in order to place sports within the wider context of Norway’s international image promoted by the Norwegian government and Norway’s international brand.

This study will also define the ways in which Norway pursues sports diplomacy and examine the impact of sport on its

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international brand. The main hypothesis to be validated is that sports diplomacy plays only a subsidiary role in shaping the international image of Norway.

The following analysis is a case study presenting various examples of particular methods applied by Norwegian authorities. The main focal points of this analysis are: sports development aid, organising sports events, and supporting the performance of Norwegian athletes in international sport, particularly winter sports.

The author of this paper decided to focus on Norway as this country is an extraordinary example of success in public diplomacy. It is a small state located far from the heart of Europe, which does not belong to the European Union and whose inhabitants speak a language fairly unknown outside its borders. Despite that, it has built a remarkable presence on the international stage thanks to finding a suitable niche and prioritizing target audiences (Ritto). For this reason, its public diplomacy strategy has been the subject of a number of studies. However, researchers haven't so far analysed sport as a dimension of Norway's public diplomacy, and this article is an attempt to fill this gap.

### **Norway's International Brand. Current perception**

Norway's population in 2014 was approximately 5.1 million, which ranked the country 117<sup>th</sup> worldwide (Countries in the world (ranked by 2014 population)). Despite this, the state is rated surprisingly highly in global brand rankings. In 2014 it was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> out of 50 in the prestigious Anholt-GfK Nation Brands Index, which measures countries' global influence (Norway's International Image "Strong and Stable"). In the Future Brand Index 2014 – a listing of the world's leading country brands – Norway is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> out of 75 (Future Brand launches the Country Brand Index 2014–15). Both indexes were primarily based on public opinion surveys undertaken worldwide. Those figures indicate that the global position of Norway's international brand and image is very high in spite of the size of its population.

Experts on international branding argue that Norway has relatively limited assets – given its population, it can be categorised as a small country. Moreover, as mentioned above, it is located far from the centres of global or European politics, and Norwegian is not a language spoken worldwide. Norway is, however, a very wealthy

country: according to the International Monetary Fund, ranking second in the world after Luxembourg in Gross Domestic Product per capita, which in 2014 was 97,013 USD (World GDP (nominal) per capita Ranking 2015). Nevertheless, economic status is not regarded as a key factor of soft power and should not hugely affect the global brand of a state or its public diplomacy. In the past, the country derived its standing from its strategic location in the Cold War context. In the rearranged international arena that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Norway had to look for other ways to distinguish itself from other countries (Bátora, 16).

Despite all this, Norway gained international recognition thanks to prioritising targets and concentrating on one strong message – presenting itself as a powerful supporter of world peace. Experts have underlined that this strategy allowed Norway to achieve international visibility that exceeds its resources. Norway's international reputation as an honest broker of peace is a result of numerous international mediations undertaken by the country's officials (Leonard, Stead, Smewing 9, 53). Because of this positive reputation, Norwegian peacekeepers have generally received a warm welcome in the countries they visited, which further strengthened this perception (Henrikson, 72).

As regards Norway's international image, apart from peacekeeping, it is best known as a generous donor of aid to poor countries. It is also generally respected for its international fleet, high standards of safety, cleanliness, and benefits from the generally positive image of Scandinavia. On the other hand, continued involvement in whaling and seal culling works against this positive perception, as it questions the commitment of the Norwegian government to ecology (Henrikson, 68, 79; Leonard, Small, 8). The following sections will analyse Norway's international image within the area of sport.

### **The definition of sports diplomacy**

Firstly, it is worthwhile to clarify the term “sports diplomacy”, which is frequently used by scholars, but a number of its definitions can be found in academic literature. Additionally, sports diplomacy has not yet been conceptualized in Poland.

While discussing sports diplomacy, the “ping-pong” diplomacy between the United States and communist China in the early 1970s

is one of the first examples that come to mind. A situation in which sports contacts are used as a convenient opportunity for politicians or diplomats to meet is probably the purest example of sports diplomacy – on such occasions, a sports meeting is used as a direct diplomatic tool and sometimes a driver for political rapprochement. This is just one definition of the term, and a very narrow one; still, some scholars view sports diplomacy in this exact way. According to David Rowe, sports diplomacy is a fairly safe and mild means of “making friends” and defusing conflicts (115), whereas Jacquie L’Etang believes that governments use sport to communicate a wish to enhance current relations (81).

The majority of scholars prefer a somewhat wider definition of sports diplomacy. According to Anurag Saxena, “sports diplomacy” applies when sport is used as a tool to enhance – or, sometimes, aggravate – diplomatic relations between two parties. A similar view is held by many other researchers, including Ellis Cashmore (349–50). This understanding of sports diplomacy obviously encompasses the one mentioned above, but introduces a second aspect – drawing attention to problematic relations. The two main methods of exposing international conflict in the context of sport are sports boycott and sports isolation. A sports boycott happens when a state, a group of states, a political leader, or individual athletes refuse to participate in a sports event, usually for political reasons. Most boycotts are directed against the host of the event or the sports organisation. Sports isolation encompasses activities aimed at preventing a particular, contested country from participating in international sports competitions – for example, by denying visas to athletes heading to sports events taking place in a given country.

The above are the most common ways to describe sports diplomacy which focus on states as participants. These two definitions, particularly the second one, are clearly correct, but they seem to overlook some important dimensions of sports diplomacy. A situation not taken into account is sports diplomacy pursued by non-state actors – international governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee or the FIFA. Due to their role, in some situations they function as regular diplomatic actors, negotiating with states or recognising new countries (Murray, Pigman, 1099).

Yet another way to define sports diplomacy is to view it as an important tool for shaping the international brand of a state. This can be achieved, among others, by organising sports events or

ensuring good performance in international sports competitions. As far as hosting sports events is concerned, the Summer and Winter Olympic Games and the world and European football championships – the so-called mega-events – play the most significant role because of their popularity and scale. However, even minor events may be of substantial diplomatic value. Similarly, winning medals in international sport matters in terms of a state's international brand – results in sport are a factor in international indexes of soft power (McClory, 7) and are believed to influence the global perception of countries (The Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index). However, just by participating in a sports event, regardless of winning medals, a small country can enhance its brand; this is especially true of new countries that have not yet earned universal recognition.

In the context of nation branding, sports diplomacy can also include activities targeted on one or more selected countries. Countries may establish bilateral sports contacts, which can include setting up training meetings with skilled coaches and athletes, supporting the development of a particular sport in a given country, or sending globally recognized athletes to other countries. The last of these methods is very successfully applied by the United States thanks to the development of programs such as American Public Diplomacy Envoys, in which sports celebrities are sent overseas to promote America and its values (Sports and Public Diplomacy Envoys 2005–2013, United States of America Congressional Record 25790, Johns, 3).

Sports diplomacy is usually treated as a form of public diplomacy; Beata Ociepka believes, for instance, that sport has a substantial role in public diplomacy as it can be used to strengthen a country's international position (13). It is hard to disagree with this view: public diplomacy can be defined as communicating an international actor's policies to citizens of foreign countries with the help of foreign ministers, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations using media broadcasts, conferences, events, collaborative projects, cultural exchanges, student exchanges and so on (Pamment, 1). Such activities are obviously meant either to promote a positive image of a country or to send specific messages. Public diplomacy is deeply bound to soft power – according to Joseph Nye, a state can achieve its goals without resorting to coercive methods, but instead by influencing others and leading them in the desired direction (5). Both public

diplomacy and sports diplomacy are, to a certain degree, means of wielding soft power.

Considering all of the above, sports diplomacy can be described as a form of public diplomacy that treats sport as an arena of diplomatic activity. Consequently, many countries pursue sports diplomacy within a wider strategy of public diplomacy. This is also true of Norway, and therefore this paper will analyse its sports diplomacy in relation to overall public diplomacy goals and strategies.

### **Norwegian strategy of public diplomacy**

Public diplomacy is particularly important for small and medium-sized countries; Norway definitely belongs to this group, especially considering its population. Public diplomacy offers these countries an opportunity to gain influence and shape their international brand beyond the limited hard power resources. Their major objective is to be internationally recognised for selected accomplishments (Bátora, 1, 6). Therefore international visibility is the key objective. Insufficient recognition by the international public is a frequent problem faced by smaller states, and generating outside interest should be their priority.

The above principles of public diplomacy certainly apply to Norway. Unlike larger states such as the United Kingdom, the United States or China, Norway does not aim to modify its public image, but to increase its international visibility, which is limited by factors such as: small population; relative political, geographical and cultural isolation, linguistic constraints and few universally recognisable iconic figures (Leonard, Small, 1–2, 24). These issues apply to Scandinavia in general.

Small states are sometimes advised to pursue “niche diplomacy”, that is, to specialise and focus on a selected area of public diplomacy instead of trying to act effectively in every sphere, which is more than their resources allow. Norway, an affluent country, could emphasise its wealth and high standards of living (even if wealth is not always regarded as an element of soft power). Instead, Norwegians decided to focus on promoting other aspects of the country’s identity. The theme of peace appears to be Norway’s niche of choice. The goal was to be seen as “The International Capital of Peace” – the Norwegian government earned this title by hosting the Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies, participating in the Oslo peace

process and many other international engagements. Some scholars have called this set of activities “the Norway Model” (Moore, Niche diplomacy: a key for smaller states to become visible?).

Norway can be regarded as an example of successfully exploiting a niche, but its well-planned and coordinated public diplomacy strategy is not oriented exclusively on peace. Efforts to formulate a comprehensive strategy began in 2003. Three separate strategies were developed to boost product advantage, national branding and Scandinavian branding (Leonard, Small, 8).

Following that, a more uniform strategy was developed. The country’s efforts to establish a strong brand were directed at presenting Norway in the light of four key themes: as a humanitarian superpower, as a place that allows for living in harmony with nature, as an equal community and as the home of internationalist adventures. The first theme concentrated on Norway’s extensive engagement in development aid and peace processes worldwide. The second drew attention to progressive environmental policies, while the third highlighted the low level of economic inequality in Norway – one of the richest countries in the world. The theme of internationalist adventure referred to many famous Norwegian adventurers, as well as to sport – Norwegians are believed to have invented skiing and base jumping; Norwegian athletes have won many medals in Winter Olympic Games; the country is also renowned for its pioneers of polar exploration (Leonard, Small, 3–4, 41). This strategy was targeted at six key countries: United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan and Russia (Leonard, Stead, Smewing, 170–171). In terms of methods, the execution of this strategy encompassed supporting networking across borders, arranging royal visits, drawing attention to outstanding Norwegian thinkers and artists – such as Henrik Ibsen or Edvard Munch – and recipients of the Peace Nobel Prize or organising major events (Leonard, Stead, Smewing 173–74). While focusing on Norway’s commitment to global peace as its most distinctive characteristic, the initial strategies did not overlook other areas of public diplomacy, which can be regarded as niches.

In time, the public diplomacy strategy of Norway began to evolve. The Norwegian Public Diplomacy Forum was founded in 2007 by Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre; its function was to prepare and develop specific strategies aimed at strengthening international communication. Shortly afterwards, in 2008, a pilot project oriented at “strengthening ‘communication bridges’ between Norway and the rest of the world” was initiated. It proved to be successful, and a more

comprehensive program titled ‘Strategy 2013’ soon followed. Specific goals of this scheme were adjusted annually (Smith). The strategy was prepared in collaboration with the Foreign Policy Centre in London and discussed in a series of seminars attended by selected representatives of government and non-governmental agencies, as well as journalists, scholars and businessmen (Gilboa).

After the ‘Strategy 2013’ program was completed, another adjustment was made to Norway’s public diplomacy strategy. Most importantly, key elements of the desired international perception of Norway have been changed, and in 2013, concentrated on “nature and value creation” and “equal opportunities brought on by sustainable living, culture and welfare state”. The first one referred mostly to natural landscapes and resources (as well as advanced technology), whereas the second stressed democratic values and a healthy balance between work, family and leisure (Norway’s image abroad – a shared responsibility). This represents a slight change compared to the previous strategies: a smaller degree of emphasis was placed on sport as a driver of the state’s international brand; this contrasts with the earlier strategies which stressed presenting Norway as the home of many winter sports and the birthplace of great adventurers.

### **Sports diplomacy in Norway**

As demonstrated above, Norwegian public diplomacy is highly developed. Like many other countries, Norway conducts its sports diplomacy within a wider strategy of public diplomacy, even if sport has not always been included into the key strategies. A brief overview of Norway’s public diplomacy strategies suggests that sport may play a small role in shaping the country’s brand and increasing its visibility. The following section contains an analysis of several examples of utilising sport to enhance Norway’s international brand and reach other public diplomacy objectives.

### **Sports development aid**

Earlier sections of this article listed the main means of conducting sports diplomacy. One of them concerned helping other countries in the area of sport, for instance by providing training



or equipment. Such activities have often been undertaken by the United States. Basketball coaches are often sent to countries where this typically American sport is gaining popularity but needs support (Rough, 285). Activities like these can be classified as development aid – a typical method of pursuing public diplomacy in general.

Not surprisingly, Norway – a country that wishes to be associated with peace and equality – is active in this field. Sport may serve as an important tool for reaching development goals, especially facilitating peace and reconciliation. Norwegian strategic documents describe sport as a “driving force for development” that can promote social integration, dialogue and tolerance – a “school for democracy”. In the area of sports development aid, sport for all is the main focus (Strategy for Norway’s culture and sports co-operation with countries in the South, 37, 39). Norway has initiated co-operation programs with developing countries focusing on this area. Their objective is to encourage long-term competence-building in developing countries (Johnson, cover). Norway has been providing sports development aid to poorer countries since the 1980s, long before adopting official public or sports diplomacy strategies (Eichberg; Darnell, 8).

As regards practical matters, Norway allocates prominent amounts of money to support sports activities in the Global South – for example, in 2003, 23 million NOK. The funds are distributed both by the Norwegian authorities and non-governmental organisations, with priority given to the government. The most important NGOs that participate in the aid programs are the Norwegian Olympic Committee, the Confederation of Sports (NIF), the Football Association of Norway (NFF), the Right to Play, and the Kicking AIDS Out Network (Strategy for Norway’s culture and sports co-operation with countries in the South 41, 43). It is typical for Norway’s public diplomacy to actively cooperate with NGOs in various fields (Henrikson, 70). The last of the organisations mentioned above – the Kicking Aids Out Network – promotes the awareness of AIDS in Africa through football and is funded by the Norwegian Development Agency (Shearer).

How does development aid affect the international brand of a state? Norway has at least two reasons for spending substantial amounts on aiding the development of sports in struggling countries. The first one is probably to enable other countries to experience the positive role sport can play in various areas. The second is aligned with the overall strategy of Norwegian public

diplomacy – sports development aid promotes Norway’s image as a country that comprehensively supports peace. Thus, sports development aid may be seen as complementary to other, more direct activities aimed at presenting Norway as a global peace broker.

### **Hosting sports events**

Organising sports events is probably the most impactful method of enhancing a country’s international brand by means of sports diplomacy. It involves spending large amounts of money, but unlike ensuring successful sports results, does not require developing a long-term system of training and support. It is therefore easier to gain international visibility by hosting a sports event – after going through the process of acquiring the rights to host it (even heads of state engage in bidding for sports events – that issue will not be covered in this article).

Norway hosted the Winter Olympic Games twice: in 1952 in Oslo, and in 1994 in Lillehammer. Oslo has applied to host the Winter Olympics once again in 2022, but withdrew its bid due to financial concerns (Abend). No other sports mega events were organised in Norway; the country hosts smaller scale championships and tournaments in less popular sports. The 2016 Youth Olympic Winter Games will take place in Lillehammer (Youth Olympic Games). In respect to sports diplomacy, and even to public diplomacy, the last Olympic Games in Lillehammer have been called “a milestone event”. Large sports events, if organised well, engage global audiences in a direct way. The Lillehammer Olympics combined excellent organisation and a fair extent of popular involvement with engaging national stories. A key role was played by the innovative opening ceremony (Leonard, Small, 73). The international media described the Lillehammer Olympics as “one of the most atmospheric and efficient Olympic Games” or “the fairy-tale Games” (Owen).

Sports mega-events increase the visibility of a country thanks to their popularity – a large number of people visit the games, while even more follow them through the media. Well organised events are particularly efficient in making the host not just visible, but visible in a good light. Even though officially the Olympic Games are hosted by cities, in practice states usually

support organising such events and benefit from them in terms of brand.

Norway hosted many elite events, including mega-events such as the Olympic Games, but in the context of sports diplomacy it is worthwhile to discuss a lesser-known event – the annual Norway Cup. This week-long event is the world's second largest youth soccer tournament attended by teams from all over the world (Shearer, U.S. Embassy gets a kick out of Sports Diplomacy). This tournament has run since 1972 and is aimed at young people aged 12 to 19. The organisers sponsor visits of teams from less developed countries (Nygård, 239). In 2012, as many as around 30 000 participants from 52 countries took part in the competition. The aim of the tournament is to “win friends for Norway through sport”. The Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs said that “the project plays a role in supporting internationalism and co-operation between Norway and for example, Brazil, Kenya, and Palestine”. The same objective is pursued by Norwegian sports diplomacy in general, by awarding sports scholarships to international students who can then attend Norwegian universities (Jarvie). This is also designed to allow foreigners to visit and discover Norway and its values – a method frequently used in public diplomacy.

This short overview of sports events hosted by Norway shows that they are treated as means of pursuing sports diplomacy – either to evoke positive emotions towards Norway or to make the country more visible (even if current public diplomacy strategies do not put a large emphasis on sport). The Norway Cup represents an interesting and extraordinary approach to sports diplomacy – each year it brings many young people to the country, allowing them to experience its high standard of living and see its beautiful landscapes.

### **Sports superiority**

Norwegian sports diplomacy can also be analysed from the perspective of its athletes' or clubs' performance. Medals won in international competitions render a country more visible, while news of sports victories can be used for various ends. During the Cold War, sports victories belonged to the arsenal of arguments used to justify the superiority of one superpower over the other. Olympic

medals are also taken into consideration when assessing a nation's soft power. Thus, results in sport matter in sports diplomacy and can influence an international brand.

Norwegian athletes perform very well, particularly considering the country's population. This may not be entirely evident while looking at Summer sports. In the 2012 London Summer Olympics, Norway was ranked 35<sup>th</sup> with two gold, one silver and one bronze medal (Medal table), while four years earlier – in Beijing – Norwegians won three gold, five silver and one bronze medal; Norway was ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the medal table (Beijing 2008 Medal Table). These results are good for any country whose population is comparable to that of Norway, but quite modest in comparison to Norway's achievements in Winter sports. During the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, Norway was only surpassed by Russia; Norwegian athletes won eleven gold, five silver and ten bronze medals (Sochi 2014 Medal Table); four years earlier in Vancouver Norway came fourth, with nine gold, eight silver and six bronze medals (Sport Vancouver 2010). Ever since the first Olympic Winter Games, Norwegian athletes have always performed very well in Winter sports. Interestingly, Norwegian athletes have often competed against opponents coming from countries that had an entirely different approach to sport and which focused on versatility rather than specialization (John, Allen, 82).

Norway's remarkable performance in sport are a result of a specific policy carried out by the government. As early as the 1980s, following a period of relatively poor achievements in elite sport, a program called 'Project 88' was introduced. This special scheme for elite sport – called 'The Norwegian Model' – relied on sports federations learning from each other. The program did not initially bring the expected results, so it was extended and an elite sports organisation – Olympiatoppen – was founded. This organisation had significant resources at its disposal and worked to support Norwegian sports (Goksøyr, Hanstad, 35–7). This has led to an outstanding improvement in Norway's results since 1992 (Augestad, Bergsgard, 195). Thus, Norwegian achievements in sport, especially the winter disciplines, are a result of a well-thought out strategy. This success naturally has benefits in terms of an international brand for the previously mentioned reasons. To conclude, Norway has achieved success in the field of sports diplomacy.

## Conclusions

Norway has achieved great success in shaping its international brand despite relatively limited assets in terms of soft power and a small population. Skilful prioritisation and fitting into a suitable niche has allowed this country to become a model of successful public diplomacy.

Sports diplomacy is a subcategory of public diplomacy. Norway developed and then adjusted a strategy of public diplomacy which now predominantly focuses on promoting peace, democratic values, sustainable living and Norwegian natural resources. The initial strategies emphasised sport as an element of nation branding, but at present sport is not seen as one of the key factors shaping the international visibility and image of Norway. Nevertheless, the country pursues a number of policies that can be regarded as sports diplomacy and that, at least indirectly, support Norway's brand. These activities have been carried out in three main areas – supplying poor countries with sports development aid, hosting sports events and maintaining superiority in international sport. Norway has proved successful in all three.

Despite its success in sports diplomacy, Norway's international image is predominantly shaped by other factors discussed above, and sports diplomacy plays a subsidiary role in Norwegian nation branding. However, this role should not be underestimated – the objectives of sports diplomacy extend beyond associating a country with sports results or promoting Norway as a sporting country. The Norway Cup discussed in the article serves as an opportunity to invite visitors from all around the world, enabling them to experience the country and its values, thus enhancing its international brand.

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