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Citation for published version:

Dzankic, J, *London's Olympics Show that the Links Between Sports, Citizenship, Politics, and National Identity are as Tangible as Ever*, 2012, Web publication/site, LSE EUROPP Blog.
<<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2012/07/30/olympics-citizenship/>>

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Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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London’s Olympics show that the links between sports, citizenship, politics, and national identity are as tangible as ever



As London’s Olympics commence, **Jelena Dzankic** argues that sports are closely related to national identity and can have a deep symbolic meaning for states such as those in the former Yugoslavia where they are central to the development of emerging national identities. She also argues that there can

also be a strong link between sports and citizenship, with many countries facilitating naturalisation for talented sportspeople.

We often think of sport only in competitive terms. Yet, with the coming of the Olympic Games, this competition also has a manifest national dimension. Sport becomes a catalyst of national identity and pride, of culture and symbols, of ideology and politics. National flags are displayed during the Olympic Games; anthems are played, while the potential difference between the formal and emotional allegiances of sports persons to their country and to their national group puts the country’s political life under a microscope. Therefore, sport has an important role, not only for understanding the construction of nations, but also for comprehending their changing citizenship regimes.

In the former Yugoslavia, as in other socialist countries, sport had a prominent role in society. Sport was not only a manifestation of citizenship, but also an ideological channel, which in the former Yugoslavia contributed to the now-forgotten principle of ‘brotherhood and unity’. For these reasons, a closer insight into the relationship between sport and national identity, politics,

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and nationality/citizenship in the post-Yugoslav states reveals the multiple aspects of interactions between the state and individuals. It helps us to understand how sport encapsulates and transmits a particular national or political identity, which is central to the development of each of the post-Yugoslav states and their citizenship regimes.



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manifestation of cultural and national elements of a society. By attending and supporting different sporting events, people reinforce the identity dimension of citizenship. Supporting a team emphasises an individual’s link to his or her polity, be it a city, a sub-state entity or a country. Although the post-Yugoslav states are all independent, sporting events still have a major role in creating and maintaining the identity of these new communities. In particular, it should be stressed that in cases of new countries, where national identities are in flux and/or unconsolidated, sport has a twofold function. First, at the domestic level, it creates a sense of belonging to the community of the state, which may or may not coincide with an individual’s ethnic/national identity. Second, at the international level, sporting events reinforce: 1) the differentiation of a certain country’s identity from other competitors, and 2) the unity of community internally, which is achieved through the symbols of the state; 3) the sense of national success at the international arena, which is domestically seen as a trade-off for poor political and economic performance.

Inter-state competition has a deep symbolic meaning, which is manifested in the fact that states compete against each other, ensuring that winning the contest is a catalyst for national pride. Particularly in team sports (basketball, football, water polo are the most popular team sports in the post-Yugoslav states), values of toughness and teamwork are central, which has also been a metaphor used to describe armed conflict. It has often been argued that

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team sports highlight **territorial control, conquest and defence**, while often using militaristic language. Hence in states that had recently been in war against each other, dominance in a sporting contest reinforces the sense of national pride. Even at the onset of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, sports were a catalyst for nationalism. The most famous example is the infamous **1990 match** between the Croatian ‘Dinamo’ from Zagreb and the Serbian ‘Crvena Zvezda’ (Red Star) from Belgrade, which ended in an unprecedented degree of violence between the nationalist supporters of the two teams, foreshadowing the former Yugoslav republics becoming fierce belligerents in the years to come.

A further symbolic dimension of international competition stems from the rituals involved. These rituals, which entail flying the national flags, playing national anthems, and teams wearing the national colours, all inspire a sense of national unity. Hence sporting events where these symbols are reproduced also gain a political meaning. In the first Olympic Games following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, in Barcelona in 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia participated as independent states, and used their new state symbols. Macedonia and the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (composed of Serbia and Montenegro) did not participate as countries at the 1992 Olympics, but their athletes competed as individual participants under the Olympic rather than the national flag. More recently, the **International Olympic Committee (IOC)** decided **not to accept the Kosovan athletes** who applied to participate in the London 2012 Olympic Games, citing Kosovo’s contested statehood as a rationale. This pushed many of these talented sports-people to **compete under another flag**.

Another event related to the symbolism of the Olympics shows the intricate link between sport, national identity, and politics in the post-Yugoslav space. During the 2004 summer Olympic Games in Athens, there was a deep contestation of the common state of Serbia and Montenegro through symbols. As the 2003 Constitutional Charter of Serbia and Montenegro did not provide clear guidelines on the text of the national anthem, the parliament of the then unified state held an extraordinary session in August 2004 in order to decide on the anthem in the wake of the Olympics. Yet, as **no agreement was reached**, the state used the old Yugoslav anthem ‘Hej Sloveni!’ (Hey Slavs!), which was **booed by young people** in the two components of Serbia and Montenegro, each of which had its own state symbols at that time.

Citizenship is the relationship between the individual and the state, and as such it includes the rights and duties stemming from an individual’s membership in the polity. The clearest link between the status of citizenship and sport is the requirement that sportspeople need to possess the nationality

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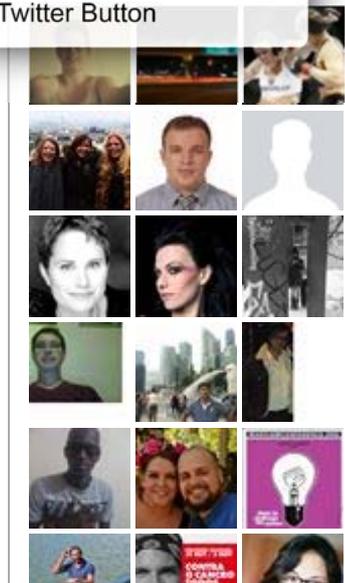
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of the state in order to represent that state in international competitions. Some sportspeople already possess the nationality of the state; however others are naturalised based on the fulfilment of certain conditions. States may in some cases decide to waive some or all of these criteria in order to naturalise people of exceptional merit, including talented sportspeople.

Very often, however, sportspeople follow the ordinary naturalisation procedure. The reason behind this practice is found in the eligibility rules of international sports federations, rather than the citizenship legislation in different countries. Effectively, international bodies that govern sports competitions uphold the principle of ‘genuine ties’ to the state, perhaps even more so than the states themselves. This means that a sportsperson needs to prove they are ‘more closely connected with the population of the State conferring nationality than that of any other State’, as noted in the 1955 *Nottebohm* ruling of the International Court of Justice. While the IOC stipulates a ‘waiting period’ of three years between competing for two national teams, according to Article 15 of the International Football Federation (FIFA) Statute, a player who has played in an official professional match for one national team is ineligible to play for the national team of another state. Holders of dual nationality are required to prove either descent in the state they opt to play for, or that they have lived continuously on the territory of that state for at least two years. Similarly, in cases where a player who has not played in an international football match acquires a new nationality, he or she is required to either prove birth, ancestry (parental or grand-parental), or to reside in that state continuously for five years after the age of 18. Having in mind FIFA’s complex eligibility rules, one cannot help but wonder what happens to players originating from states that have come into being through disintegration, as has been the case with all of the post-Yugoslav states. In fact, the only exception to the eligibility rules regarding nationality that can be found in FIFA’s Statute refer to the permanent loss of nationality of a state without the individual’s consent, in which case the player is allowed to become a member of another country’s national team.

These strict rules draw on the logic of loyalty to the state, which in turn refers to the relationship between sports and national pride. Yet, the logic that the states employ in regulating the link between citizenship and sports is different from the one of international sports associations. In fact, many countries allow talented sportspeople to acquire their citizenship through facilitated naturalisation on grounds of national interest. States, unlike sports governing entities, do not see an individual’s citizenship of origin as a barrier to that person’s contribution to their national sporting teams. The maximisation of performance of their national team by acquiring talented foreign players, for the states, can be beneficial for inspiring a sense of national pride among the

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general population. That is, the nationalist logic of states fades away in the light of contributing to what is considered to be ‘a greater public good’.

This logic has resulted in a number of facilitated naturalisations of talented sportspeople in the Western Balkans. The football player Eduardo da Silva is an example, who along with his Brazilian colleagues Carlos Santos de Jesus, Etto, and Sammir, and the Cameroonian Matthias Chago, has received Croatian citizenship. In 2009, the Kosovan-born Fatos Beqiraj received Montenegrin citizenship and is a member of that country’s national football team. Kosovo is not yet a full FIFA member and is thus unable to compete in competitive international football matches. As a consequence, many Kosovan-born athletes compete for other countries.

Perhaps the most interesting example is found in Macedonia. While the Macedonian government on the one hand promotes an ethnic image of the nation that dates back to antiquity, on the other hand, they have decided to **naturalise the American-born basketball players** Lester ‘Bo’ McCalebb, Marques Green, Kennedy Winston, Jeremiah Massey and Darius Washington. This is indicative of the complex links between citizenship, sports, and national identity. While countries may be resistant to relax their ordinary naturalisation procedures, the absorption into their citizenship of those whose talent may be of great benefit does not represent a problem, or a threat to their ethnic conception of the nation. Rather, the performance of these individuals at international sporting events is seen as a contribution to ‘national pride’, ‘national unity’ and the ‘national interest’ of the state, which overrides concerns over their ethnic/national origin.

With the 2012 Olympic flame having just reached London, the links between sports, citizenship, politics, and national identity in the post-Yugoslav states become as tangible as ever. *Ludens incipient... or ... Let the Games begin!*

A longer version of this article was first published at [Citsee.eu](http://citsee.eu).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Jelena Dzankic – European University Institute

Jelena Dzankic holds a PhD from the Faculty of Politics, Psychology and Social Sciences (PPSIS) at the University of Cambridge (New Hall College). Her academic interests fall within the fields of transition of SEE countries,

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