



THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SPORTSWASHING IN THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine the historical origins of contemporary sportswashing debates within the context of the modern Olympic movement. The research argues that the use of sports organizations for international image management, propaganda, diplomatic visibility, and the production of political legitimacy is not merely a contemporary phenomenon; it is part of a historical continuum that has developed since the early days of modern sports history. The study adopts a qualitative historical research design; International Olympic Committee reports, historical archival documents, propaganda materials, media records, and sports history literature are examined using an interpretive historical analysis method. The theoretical framework of the research is based on soft power theory, the sports diplomacy approach, propaganda theory, and the perspective of the spectacle society. The analysis identifies the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a major historical turning point in the political use of sport for international image management and propaganda. Furthermore, it is determined that after the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, Cold War competition transformed sports organizations into arenas of ideological representation. The study further argues that globalization and media expansion transformed mega-sport events into strategic instruments of soft power and international visibility. Rather than representing an entirely new phenomenon, contemporary sportswashing practices appear as contemporary manifestations of longer historical processes embedded within the Olympic movement.

Keywords: sportswashing, Olympic Games, sports diplomacy, soft power, propaganda

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of "sportswashing" has become increasingly used in academic literature to explain the function of sport within international politics. Generally, the concept refers to the strategies employed by states, governments, or political actors to

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strengthen their international image, render political criticism invisible, and generate global legitimacy through sports organizations, sports investments, and mega-sports events (Boykoff, 2022). Particularly in recent years, the association of states such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, China, and Russia with mega-sports events has brought sportswashing discussions to the center of international relations, sports history, and sports diplomacy literature.

However, a significant portion of the existing literature tends to evaluate the phenomenon of sportswashing largely within the context of contemporary global politics. Studies, particularly those focused on media and politics, tend to associate sportswashing more with the international image management strategies of twenty-first-century authoritarian regimes (Reiche & Sorek, 2019). However, this approach overlooks the fact that the use of sports organizations for political representation and the production of international legitimacy has a much longer history. Yet, when examining the development of the modern Olympic movement, it becomes clear that the use of sport for international visibility, propaganda, and the production of symbolic power has been evident since the early stages of modern sports history.

Although the modern Olympic Games were restructured by Pierre de Coubertin in line with ideals of international peace, friendship, and cultural rapprochement, the organization has become increasingly politicized throughout history. Particularly with the strengthening of nation-states, the rise of mass nationalism, and the development of communication technologies, the Olympic Games have transformed into global platforms where states symbolically represent their positions within the international system (Hargreaves, 1992). In practice, Olympic events increasingly functioned as symbolic arenas in which states projected national prestige and ideological identity.

This transformation has been particularly pronounced throughout the twentieth century. With the proliferation of mass media, the global media visibility of the Olympic Games has dramatically increased, significantly enhancing the political value of the organizations (Roche, 2000). Thanks to radio broadcasting, film news, television broadcasts, and later digital media technologies, the Olympics have become global media events followed simultaneously by millions of people. This process has facilitated the strategic use of sporting events by states to influence international public opinion and build a global image.

The role of sport in international politics has long been debated, particularly in the literature on propaganda and nationalism. Hoberman (1984) argues that modern sport has become one of the important tools in the reproduction of national ideologies, while Allison (1986) emphasizes its role in producing prestige and diplomatic visibility within the context of international relations. Similarly, Arnaud and Riordan (1998) demonstrate that sports organizations, especially in the twentieth century, have transformed into symbolic arenas of interstate political competition. These studies reveal that considering sport solely as a cultural or entertainment-oriented activity is insufficient; it demonstrates that sport has become a crucial component of modern international politics.

In this context, the 1936 Berlin Olympics are considered one of the most visible historical examples of the use of sport for propaganda and international image

management. Historians have shown that Nazi Germany used the Berlin Olympics not only as a sporting competition but also as a large-scale propaganda platform through which the regime could present its discourses of modernity, discipline, national unity, and political power to the international public (Large, 2007; Mandell, 1971). Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia*, in particular, played a significant role in making Nazi aesthetics visible on a global scale through sport (Bach, 2007). This is important in demonstrating how sporting organizations can be used to aestheticize political ideologies.

The politicization of sport was not limited to Nazi Germany. The bipolar international system that took shape after World War II further increased the importance of sporting organizations in ideological competition. Especially after the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, the Olympic Games became one of the most visible arenas of symbolic competition between capitalist and socialist blocs (Hill, 1992). The achievements of athletes were interpreted not only as individual performance but also as indicators of the superiority of the political systems they represented. Thus, medal rankings, organizational capacity, and sporting success became important tools for generating international prestige (Riordan, 1977).

Since the late twentieth century, globalization processes and transformations in media technologies have further expanded the political functions of sports organizations. Mega sporting events, in particular, have become crucial components of states' strategies for attracting international investment, developing tourism, gaining diplomatic visibility, and building national brands (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). In this process, sports organizations have become directly linked not only to sporting success but also to global economic competition, soft power generation, and international image management.

The soft power approach, developed by Joseph Nye, has become one of the important theoretical tools for understanding the political role of sports organizations in international relations. According to Nye (2004), states can create their international influence not only through military or economic power, but also through cultural appeal, value creation, and symbolic representation. In this context, mega-sports organizations have become important tools that enable states to generate positive perceptions in international public opinion.

However, contemporary discussions about sportswashing raise not only the political use of sport but also the ethical dimensions of sports organizations. It is argued that states associated with human rights violations, labor rights issues, freedom of expression debates, and authoritarian regimes attempt to generate international legitimacy through mega-sports events (Boykoff, 2022). Therefore, the concept of sportswashing has become an interdisciplinary field of discussion, not only in terms of sports history but also in international relations, media studies, and political communication.

This study aims to evaluate the debates surrounding sportswashing from a historical continuity perspective. The main argument of the study is that the practices referred to as sportswashing today are current forms of long-standing political representation and image management practices within the modern Olympic movement.

Accordingly, the research aims to place contemporary sportswashing debates within a broader historical context by examining the relationship between propaganda, soft power, international visibility, and political legitimacy within the historical development of the Olympic Games.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on four fundamental approaches that explain the function of sport within international politics: soft power theory, the sport diplomacy approach, propaganda theory, and the spectacle society perspective. The research argues that mega-sports events are not merely sporting events; they also become significant components of states' processes for generating international legitimacy, diplomatic visibility, and symbolic power. Therefore, the study evaluates contemporary sportswashing debates not only within the framework of current political developments but also within the historical and structural transformation of the modern international sports system.

One of the most widely used theoretical approaches to explaining the political functions of modern sports organizations is soft power theory. Developed by Joseph Nye, the soft power approach argues that states can exert their international influence not only through military and economic power, but also through cultural appeal, normative influence, and symbolic representation (Nye, 2004). According to Nye, soft power is the capacity to influence the choices of other actors without using coercive means. In this context, areas such as culture, media, diplomacy, art, and sports become important resources that can increase the influence of states within the international system.

When evaluated in light of research findings, mega sporting events stand out as one of the most visible tools for soft power production. Global organizations, particularly the Olympic Games, enable states to present their discourses of modernity, development, security, cultural appeal, and international integration to the global public. According to Grix and Brannagan (2016), mega sporting events increase states' international visibility while also influencing global perception production processes. Therefore, mega events should be considered not only as sporting events but also as tools for the production of diplomatic and symbolic capital.

While the soft power approach is important in explaining the role of sports organizations in generating international prestige, it is insufficient on its own to understand the political functions of sport. Therefore, this study also draws upon the literature on sports diplomacy. The sports diplomacy approach argues that sport can be used as a tool for communication, diplomatic interaction, and international representation in interstate relations (Murray, 2018). From this perspective, sports organizations are considered not only arenas for athletic performance but also diplomatic platforms where states symbolically represent their positions within the international system.

The literature on sports diplomacy offers significant theoretical contributions, particularly in explaining Olympic competitions during the Cold War. According to

Allison and Monnington (2002), sports organizations have become important symbolic tools used by states in their struggle for international prestige. Olympic medal rankings, sporting achievements, and organizational capacity, in particular, have been interpreted as indicators of the superiority of states' political systems. Thus, sports organizations have transformed from mere cultural events into arenas of diplomatic visibility and ideological representation.

The third theoretical axis of the study is propaganda theory. Propaganda studies focus on the processes by which modern states use mass media to shape public opinion and produce political legitimacy. The use of sports organizations by totalitarian regimes for propaganda purposes has highlighted the importance of sports in terms of political communication. In this context, Ellul's (1973) approach to propaganda is significant. According to Ellul, modern propaganda does not consist solely of direct political discourse; it also operates through cultural events, media shows, and symbolic performances. In this respect, sports organizations have become important components of modern propaganda systems.

The 1936 Berlin Olympics, in particular, is considered one of the central historical examples in terms of propaganda theory. Nazi Germany used the Berlin Olympics not only as a sporting competition but also as a large-scale propaganda arena where the regime could present its discourse of modernity, order, discipline, and national unity to the international public (Large, 2007). This is important in demonstrating how sporting events can be used to aestheticize political ideologies.

One of the important theoretical frameworks that complements the propaganda approach is Debord's theory of the spectacle society. According to Debord (1995), in modern societies, political power is increasingly reproduced through visual representation, media performances, and mass spectacles. In this context, mega-sports organizations are transforming into large symbolic performance arenas where states dramatize their political authority and make their national identities visible on a global scale.

The spectacle society approach is particularly important in terms of Olympic opening ceremonies, stadium architecture, media broadcasts, and national narratives. Mega sporting events are not only arenas for showcasing athletic performances; they are also global media events where states visually represent discourses of power, order, modernity, and national unity. Therefore, the political impact of sporting events stems not only from direct propaganda messages but also from the aesthetic and symbolic structure of the organizations.

The theoretical framework of this study is also related to the literature on nationalism and national identity. According to Hargreaves (1992), the Olympic movement has increasingly become one of the important arenas of nationalist competition with the rise of modern nation-states. National anthems, flags, medal ceremonies, and national team representations transform sports organizations into symbolic spaces where national identities are reproduced. This shows that sport plays an important role not only in the production of cultural but also political belonging.

One of the key theoretical arguments of this research is that the concept of contemporary sportswashing cannot be evaluated independently of these historical and theoretical processes. Sportswashing should be considered not only as a new propaganda strategy of contemporary authoritarian regimes, but also as a current form of long-term political representation processes that have emerged within the historical transformation of modern sports organizations. Therefore, this study examines the concept of sportswashing from a historical continuity perspective and focuses on the structural political functions of mega-sports organizations within the modern international system. Accordingly, the research evaluates the role of sports organizations in international relations not only at the level of sporting success or cultural representation, but also in the context of propaganda, diplomacy, soft power, media spectacle, and the production of symbolic legitimacy. Thus, the study aims to analyze contemporary sportswashing discussions within a broader historical and theoretical framework.

3. Material and Methods

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative historical research design in order to examine the historical roots of contemporary sportswashing debates in the context of the Olympic movement. The primary aim of the research is to analyze the historical continuity of the use of mega sport events by states for international image construction, political legitimacy, diplomatic visibility, and symbolic power representation. In this context, sport organizations are evaluated not merely as athletic competitions, but also as historical and political structures closely connected to international relations, propaganda, diplomacy, media representation, and global visibility processes.

The study is grounded in an interpretive historical approach. Historical research methods aim not only to chronologically describe past events, but also to interpret historical processes within their political, cultural, and social contexts (Booth, 2005). Accordingly, the development of the Olympic movement is examined not solely from the perspective of sport history, but also through its relationship with propaganda, ideological representation, symbolic legitimacy, and international prestige production.

The primary data collection method of the study is historical document analysis. Historical document analysis involves the systematic examination of written, visual, and institutional materials related to past events and is widely used in sport history, diplomacy studies, and political communication research. Within this framework, the study benefited from official Olympic reports, digital archival materials, media records, propaganda-related visual documents, and historical secondary literature concerning the political functions of mega sport organizations.

The research relies predominantly on secondary academic sources. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, edited volumes, and theoretical studies related to sport history, sport diplomacy, soft power, propaganda, nationalism, mega sport events, and international relations were systematically reviewed. In particular, studies examining the relationship between sport organizations and international visibility, diplomatic prestige,

symbolic representation, and political legitimacy constituted the conceptual and analytical foundation of the research (Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Murray, 2018).

In addition to secondary literature, selected historical and archival materials were used to support the historical interpretation process. These materials include official publications related to the Olympic Games, historical media records, visual propaganda materials, and digital archival resources associated with the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the Cold War Olympic period. Furthermore, materials obtained from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum archives and Olympic historical collections were utilized as supplementary historical references in the analysis of Nazi Germany's representation strategies during the Berlin Olympics.

The data analysis process was conducted through interpretive historical analysis. In this process, recurring historical patterns concerning the political use of sport organizations were identified and subsequently interpreted within the theoretical frameworks of soft power, sport diplomacy, propaganda theory, and the society of the spectacle. The analysis particularly focused on how mega sport events became instruments of international image production, diplomatic prestige, ideological representation, and symbolic legitimacy throughout the twentieth century.

The study also employed a case study approach. The 1936 Berlin Olympics, the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, and the Cold War Olympic period were selected as major historical turning points because these events clearly demonstrate the political transformation of international sport organizations. The Berlin Olympics were examined in relation to propaganda and international image management, whereas the Helsinki Olympics and subsequent Cold War Games were analyzed in the context of ideological rivalry and sport diplomacy (Large, 2007; Riordan, 1977).

One of the major methodological considerations of the study was the avoidance of anachronistic interpretation. Since the concept of "sportswashing" emerged primarily in the twenty-first century, the study does not directly label historical cases as sportswashing. Instead, historical examples such as the Berlin Olympics and Cold War Olympic competitions are interpreted as historical antecedents of practices that are contemporarily conceptualized as sportswashing. This approach helps preserve historical context while minimizing the risk of projecting contemporary terminology directly onto past events.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Transformation of the Olympic Games into an International Image and Political Representation Tool

One of the most fundamental findings of the research is that the Olympic Games have not remained merely an arena of sporting competition in the modern era; over time, they have transformed into a global communication platform used by states for international image building, political representation, and symbolic displays of power. Historical findings show that, particularly throughout the twentieth century, states strategically

used Olympic organizations to gain international visibility, strengthen the legitimacy of their regimes, and create a positive perception in global public opinion.

While the fundamental discourse of the modern Olympic movement was based on international peace, friendship, and apolitical sporting competition at its inception, research findings reveal that this discourse has become increasingly politicized at the practical level. Although Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic philosophy was founded on ideals of universalism and international cultural rapprochement, the rise of the modern nation-state inevitably transformed sporting organizations into arenas of nationalist and political competition (Hargreaves, 1992). In particular, national anthems, flags, medal ceremonies, and national team representations have caused sporting events to become symbolic mechanisms that make state identities visible.

Research findings indicate that the politicization of the Olympics has accelerated, particularly with the development of mass media. The spread of radio broadcasting in the first half of the twentieth century, followed by the development of film news and television technologies, transformed the Olympic Games into global media events (Roche, 2000). Thus, the organizations ceased to be merely sporting competitions watched in stadiums; they became international spectacles followed simultaneously by millions of people. This transformation has made it easier for states to use sporting events to influence international public opinion and gain global visibility.

One of the key findings of the research is that states view Olympic organizations as indicators of modernity and development. Host countries, in particular, have used major sporting events not only for sporting achievement but also as international showcases for infrastructure capacity, technological advancement, urban planning, and social order. Olympic stadiums, transportation networks, opening ceremonies, and organizational capacity have become tools that symbolically represent states' positions within the international system. In this context, mega-sporting events have become large-scale performance arenas where modern nation-states present themselves to the global public.

The findings also highlight the importance of sports organizations in the construction of national identity. Modern sport functions not only as a mechanism for individual athletic performance but also as a mechanism for the production of collective national belonging. According to Hobsbawm (1990), modern sports organizations are symbolic rituals in which national identities are reproduced on a mass scale. The intensive use of national symbols, especially during the Olympic Games, has strengthened the structural relationship between sport and modern nationalism. The research findings show that states combine this symbolic potential with international visibility strategies.

One of the important findings of the research is that the Olympic Games are increasingly becoming arenas of diplomatic visibility. In particular, the participation of heads of state in the organizations, the political messages given during the opening ceremonies, and international media coverage have transformed sporting events into platforms for diplomatic communication. According to Allison and Monnington (2002), sporting events have become one of the important tools of prestige competition within

modern international relations. In this context, states have evaluated sporting achievements not only as athletic performance but also as an indicator of power and status within the international system.

Research findings also show that the propaganda function of sports organizations is not limited to totalitarian regimes. Democratic states have also used mega-sports events to reinforce narratives of national unity, economic development, and international prestige. The investments made by the United States and the Soviet Union in sports organizations, particularly during the Cold War, clearly demonstrate the importance of sport in international political competition (Riordan, 1977). Thus, sports organizations have become tools that symbolically represent the supremacy of ideological systems.

One of the striking findings of the research is that mega-sports organizations have acquired more complex political functions alongside the processes of economic and cultural globalization. Particularly since the late twentieth century, sports organizations have transformed into strategic tools for national brand building, tourism development, attracting investment, and securing global media visibility (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). This has made sports organizations not only sporting events but also platforms for economic and diplomatic competition.

The findings also demonstrate a significant contradiction between the Olympic movement's official rhetoric of "political neutrality" and the historical reality of the organizations. While the International Olympic Committee has historically emphasized that sport is above politics, research findings reveal that the Olympics have long been intertwined with propaganda, diplomatic competition, and international image-building processes (Hill, 1992). The significant economic and political investments made by major powers in sporting events clearly demonstrate that the Olympics are not viewed solely as a sporting event.

When evaluated in light of the overall findings of the research, it is understood that the Olympic Games have transformed into mechanisms of global political representation in the modern era. Sports organizations are no longer merely arenas for athletic performance; they have also become important components of states' processes for generating international legitimacy, visibility, and symbolic power. This is critically important for understanding the historical background of sportswashing discussions. Because, according to the research findings, practices defined as sportswashing today emerge as current forms of political representation and image management processes that have long existed within the modern Olympic movement.

4.2 The 1936 Berlin Olympics and the Institutionalization of Political Demonstration

The second key finding of the study shows that the 1936 Berlin Olympics constituted a critical historical turning point in modern sports history in terms of international image management, propaganda, and political spectacle. The findings reveal that Nazi Germany did not view the Berlin Olympics merely as an event for sporting competition; it used the organization to strengthen the regime's legitimacy in the international public eye, reshape Germany's global image, and indirectly make Nazi ideology visible. Therefore, the Berlin Olympics are considered one of the most visible historical examples

of the use of modern sporting events as a tool for propaganda and international representation.

Research findings indicate that Nazi Germany placed the Olympic Games at the center of its political strategy. Following Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Germany faced intense international criticism due to its antisemitic policies, political repression, and militarization (Large, 2007). In particular, the Nuremberg Laws and systematic discriminatory policies against Jews severely damaged Germany's international image. In this context, the Berlin Olympics were not only a sporting event for the Nazi regime but also a major diplomatic opportunity for Germany to present a controlled and positive image to the outside world.

The findings show that the Nazi regime integrated the Olympic organization with modern propaganda techniques. Prior to the Olympics, the regime made large-scale infrastructure investments, building modern stadiums, transportation systems, and sports facilities; it attempted to showcase Germany's technological advancement and organizational capacity to the global public (Krüger, 1999). In particular, the Berlin Olympic Stadium was designed not only as a venue for sporting events but also as an architectural spectacle symbolizing the Nazi regime's understanding of power, discipline, and order.

Research findings demonstrate that architecture played a central role in Nazi propaganda strategy. Olympic venues, designed in accordance with Speer's monumental architectural vision, visually represented the regime's discourse of continuity, authority, and mass unity. Massive columns, symmetrical arrangements, expansive ceremonial areas, and mass choreography reflect the fundamental elements of Nazi aesthetics. This reveals that sporting events became not only arenas for athletic performance but also spectacles where political ideologies were spatially and visually reproduced.

One of the key findings of the study is that the Nazi regime carried out careful image control in the international public sphere throughout the Olympic process. Archives from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum show that during the Olympics, overt antisemitic propaganda materials were temporarily removed from Berlin, anti-Jewish slogans were reduced in areas frequented by foreign tourists, and the regime attempted to make its harsh policies less visible to the international public (USHMM, n.d.). This reveals that the sporting event was used not only to produce propaganda but also to reduce the visibility of political criticism. When viewed in the context of contemporary sportswashing discussions, this strategy has striking historical parallels.

The research findings also show that the Berlin Olympics were one of the most transformative events in media history. The 1936 Olympics are considered one of the first global sporting events to utilize modern communication technologies on a large scale (Roche, 2000). Through radio broadcasts, film news, and international press, the Olympics reached millions of people worldwide. The Nazi regime recognized the impact of media technologies on international public opinion and transformed the Olympics into a global propaganda event.

In this context, one of the most important findings of the research is the role played by Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* in the fusion of sport and political aesthetics. Riefenstahl's film is not merely a sports film documenting the Olympic competitions; it is also a major visual project that made Nazi aesthetics visible on an international scale through sport (Bach, 2007). In the film, athletic bodies are associated with discourses of aesthetic perfection, discipline, and power; individual performance is presented as part of collective national greatness. In particular, camera angles, the use of lighting, and body aesthetics are directly linked to the Nazi ideology's understanding of physical superiority and discipline.

The research findings reveal that the aestheticization of sport at the Berlin Olympics played a significant role in the production of political legitimacy. When viewed in the context of Debord's (1995) approach to the spectacle society, the Berlin Olympics can be seen as one of the historical examples where modern political power is reproduced through mass media spectacle. Here, the sporting event is no longer merely a sporting activity; it has transformed into a global performance arena where political authority is dramatized.

One of the striking findings of the study is the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) stance during the Berlin Olympics. Although the IOC officially maintained that sport should be above politics, Nazi Germany openly used the event for political propaganda. The fact that the event was not cancelled or subjected to serious sanctions reveals the limited institutional capacity of the Olympic movement to withstand political manipulation (Hill, 1992). This provides important historical context for the ethical and political debates surrounding mega-sports events today.

The research also shows that the Berlin Olympics had contradictory effects on international public opinion. While some journalists and observers were aware of Nazi Germany's propaganda strategies, the technical success and visual impact of the organization temporarily strengthened Germany's international image (Mandell, 1971). This demonstrates that the capacity of sporting events to generate political legitimacy stems not only from direct propaganda discourse but also from organizational success, media aesthetics, and international visibility.

In light of the findings, the 1936 Berlin Olympics stand out as a central historical example for understanding the political functions of modern mega-sports events. The organization demonstrated how sport can be used for propaganda, diplomatic visibility, media aesthetics, and international image production. Therefore, discussions on contemporary sportswashing should be evaluated not only through contemporary political examples but also through historical experiences like the Berlin Olympics.

The overall findings of the study show that the Berlin Olympics accelerated the institutionalization of political spectacle in the history of modern sports. Following this process, sporting events became not merely athletic events, but global media events where states symbolically represented their political positions within the international system. Thus, the Berlin Olympics are considered one of the historical turning points in the structural relationship between modern sport and propaganda and international image management.

4.3 The Cold War-Era Olympics and the Globalization of Ideological Rivalry

The third key finding of the study shows that the bipolar international system that took shape after World War II transformed the Olympic Games into one of the most visible symbolic arenas of global ideological competition. The findings reveal that, particularly during the Cold War, sporting events functioned not only as arenas for athletic performance but also as platforms for political representation where capitalist and socialist systems attempted to demonstrate their superiority to the international public. This process significantly expanded the political role of sport within international relations and placed mega-sporting events at the center of the global struggle for prestige.

Research findings indicate that sport became a strategic component of state policy during the Cold War. The ideological rivalry that emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II intensified not only in military and economic spheres, but also in cultural representation, scientific achievement, and athletic performance (Riordan, 1977). In this context, sports organizations transformed into symbolic arenas of struggle where states could demonstrate their systemic superiority to the global public.

One of the most important findings of the study is that the 1952 Helsinki Olympics constituted a critical turning point in the political transformation of modern Olympic history. With the Soviet Union's first participation in the Summer Olympics, the Olympic movement explicitly became part of the global competition between two ideological blocs. The Helsinki Olympics served not only as a sporting event but also as an international stage for the symbolic struggle between socialism and capitalism.

Research findings show that the Soviet model of sport institutionalized the politicization of sport. The Soviet Union did not view sport merely as physical activity or recreation; it saw it as a mechanism for producing collective discipline, national power, and ideological superiority (Riordan, 1977). The state-sponsored sports system focused on producing international success through early talent selection, centralized training programs, and scientific performance enhancement methods. Thus, athletes became not only athletes but also international representatives of the socialist system.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the Soviet approach to sports is its direct linking of sporting success to ideological success. Research findings reveal that the Soviet press presented Olympic medals as an indicator of the scientific, cultural, and social superiority of the socialist system. Athletes' achievements were represented as products of collective discipline and the socialist organizational model. This demonstrates that sport was transformed from an arena of individual competition into an arena of ideological performance.

Similarly, the United States has linked Olympic success to the supremacy of its liberal democratic system. In particular, narratives of individual freedom, competitiveness, and personal achievement have become fundamental elements of American sports discourse (Allison & Monnington, 2002). Thus, both blocs have viewed sporting achievements not merely as athletic performances, but as symbolic indicators of the superiority of the political systems they represent.

One of the key findings of the study is that during the Cold War, medal tables became mechanisms for the production of international political meaning. Olympic medal rankings were presented by the media not only as a list of sporting achievements but also as an indicator of ideological superiority. The medal competition, particularly between the United States and the Soviet Union, was interpreted by the public as a struggle between systems. This significantly strengthened the role of sports organizations in generating international prestige.

Research findings also show that media technologies expanded the political influence of sport during the Cold War era. The global spread of television broadcasting enabled the Olympic Games to be watched by millions of people worldwide (Roche, 2000). Thus, sporting organizations became much more effective tools in terms of global propaganda and diplomatic visibility. Athletes were no longer just national heroes; they became global media figures.

In this context, one of the striking findings of the research is that the Cold War Olympics became an arena of ideological competition in terms of body politics. In particular, physical strength, discipline, endurance, and performance capacity were associated with the biological and cultural superiority of political systems. According to Hoberman (1984), modern sports systems have become important parts of the politicization of the body. This situation became more visible during the Cold War; athletes' bodies were transformed into symbolic carriers of ideological performance.

Research findings also show that during the Cold War, sporting organizations became direct components of diplomatic crises and international tensions. The 1980 Summer Olympics boycott, in particular, was one of the most visible examples of sport being used as a tool of foreign policy. The boycott, spearheaded by the United States following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, severely undermined the Olympic movement's discourse of political neutrality (Hill, 1992). In this context, the sporting organization directly transformed into a mechanism for diplomatic sanctions.

Similarly, the boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics by the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries further highlighted the ideological function of sport within the bipolar international system. These boycotts demonstrate that the Olympics cannot be considered merely sporting events; rather, they have become a symbolic arena for global political tensions.

One of the study's striking findings is that sports organizations during the Cold War served as precursors to modern soft power strategies. Both superpowers used sports organizations to generate international visibility, diplomatic influence, and ideological appeal. This is important for understanding the historical context of contemporary sportswashing debates because the role of sports organizations in generating international legitimacy became more systematic and institutionalized during the Cold War.

The research also shows that although the International Olympic Committee maintained its rhetoric of "political neutrality" throughout the Cold War, the organizations became arenas of intense political competition in practice. While the IOC argued that sport was above politics, the Olympics were at the center of ideological

struggles, diplomatic crises, and international propaganda processes (Hill, 1992). This situation further intensified the debates surrounding the apolitical identity of the Olympic movement.

Based on the findings, the Cold War-era Olympics expanded the political role of sport within international relations on a global scale. Sporting organizations became not only arenas of athletic competition but also mechanisms for ideological representation, diplomatic visibility, and the production of international prestige. This process significantly contributed to the formation of the historical-political context in which contemporary sportswashing practices emerged.

4.4 Mega Sporting Events, Globalization, and the Institutionalization of Soft Power

The fourth key finding of the study is that, since the late twentieth century, with the processes of globalization, the transformation in media technologies, and the expansion of international communication networks, mega-sports organizations have become strategic soft power tools for states. The findings show that the Olympic Games and similar global sports organizations are no longer associated solely with sporting success; they have also become central to states' strategies for international visibility, diplomatic prestige, economic competitiveness, and national brand building.

Research findings reveal that the political functions of sports organizations have expanded further with the transformation of the international system after the Cold War. The end of the bipolar system, the acceleration of neoliberal globalization, and the growth of the media economy have dramatically increased the economic and diplomatic value of mega-sports events (Miller et al., 2001). In particular, global broadcasting rights, sponsorship deals, the tourism economy, and city branding processes have transformed the Olympic Games into large-scale global economic projects.

One of the striking findings of the research is that sports organizations have become directly linked to "nation branding" strategies. Nation branding refers to the use of cultural, economic, and political tools by states to manage their perception within the international system. In this process, mega-sports events have transformed into large international showcases where states make their discourses of modernity, security, economic development, and global integration visible (Grix & Lee, 2013). Thus, sports organizations have become not only sporting events but also international image management mechanisms.

Research findings show that, especially since the 1990s, hosting the Olympic Games has become a symbol of diplomatic prestige for states. States have begun to view mega-sporting events not only within the scope of sports policy but also as part of their foreign policy and economic development strategies. Developing economies, in particular, have aimed to increase their visibility within the global system through major sporting events. This demonstrates that sporting events have become one of the symbolic arenas of international competition.

In this context, one of the important findings of the research is that mega sporting events function as global media spectacles. With the globalization of television broadcasting and the development of digital media technologies, the Olympic Games

have transformed into international media events followed simultaneously by billions of people (Roche, 2000). Opening ceremonies, cityscapes, architectural projects, and national narratives have circulated worldwide through global media. Thus, sporting events have become large-scale visual performance arenas for states to present to the international public.

Research findings also show that the aesthetic and architectural dimensions of mega-sports events are of central importance in terms of political representation. In particular, new stadiums, Olympic villages, transportation projects, and urban transformation programs function as symbolic structures that embody the discourses of modernity and development of states. According to Horne and Manzenreiter (2006), mega-sports events have become important parts of global capitalism and urbanization processes. These events are not only sporting competitions; they are also large-scale economic and political projects in which cities and states are rebranded on a global scale.

One of the striking findings of the research is the increasing integration of mega-sports events with cultural diplomacy. Opening ceremonies and cultural displays have become symbolic platforms where states can present their historical narratives, national identities, and cultural heritage on a global scale. Olympic opening ceremonies, in particular, have become global performance arenas where modern states represent themselves aesthetically. This demonstrates that sports organizations play a significant role not only in sporting competition but also in cultural representation and the production of international identity.

When evaluated in light of the research findings, Joseph Nye's soft power approach has become one of the important theoretical tools in explaining the political functions of mega-sports organizations. According to Nye (2004), the global influence of states depends not only on their coercive power capacity but also on their ability to generate appeal. In this context, sports organizations are considered as tools for generating cultural appeal, international visibility, and diplomatic influence. In particular, successful mega-event organizations can enhance the global prestige of states.

However, research findings also show that mega-sports events are not only considered positive soft power tools. In particular, the economic costs of large organizations, displacement processes, security policies, and human rights debates have led to critical evaluation of these organizations. Horne (2007) argues that mega-sports events are often associated with neoliberal urbanization policies and global capital movements. Therefore, sports organizations not only generate cultural appeal but can also create social inequalities and political tensions.

One of the key findings of the study is that mega-sports events are increasingly subjected to intense political scrutiny by international media. In particular, discussions on human rights, freedom of expression, labor rights, and democratization have become integral parts of major sporting events. This has been decisive in the emergence of contemporary sportswashing debates, because the use of sporting events by states to generate a positive international image has also led to more intense questioning of the ethical and political dimensions of these organizations.

Research findings also show that mega-sports events have developed stronger relationships with the private sector and international companies alongside economic globalization. Multinational sponsors, media companies, and global advertising networks have become key actors in the Olympic economy (Tomlinson & Young, 2006). This demonstrates that sports organizations have become not only state-centric political processes but also important components of global capitalism.

When evaluated in light of the findings, mega-sports organizations have acquired multifaceted political functions in the modern international system. Sports organizations are no longer merely arenas of athletic competition; they have transformed into global events central to processes of diplomatic visibility, cultural representation, economic competition, media performance, and the production of international legitimacy. This is critical to understanding the historical background of contemporary sportswashing debates, as modern sports organizations have long evolved intertwined with processes of international image management and the production of symbolic power.

The overall findings of the study show that in the age of soft power, mega-sports organizations have become one of the central tools in states' strategies to strengthen their positions within the international system. Thus, sports organizations are transforming into an intersection of the cultural, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of modern international politics.

4.5 Contemporary Sportswashing Debates and Historical Continuity

The final key finding of the study demonstrates that contemporary sportswashing debates do not point to an entirely new historical phenomenon, but rather to current forms of the long-standing political functions of modern sports organizations. The findings reveal that the use of sports organizations for international image management, political legitimacy generation, and diplomatic visibility has become increasingly institutionalized throughout the historical development of the modern Olympic movement. Therefore, the study argues that the concept of sportswashing should be evaluated not only within the framework of contemporary geopolitical developments but also within the long-term transformation processes of modern sports history.

Research findings indicate that one of the main reasons for the intensification of contemporary sportswashing debates, particularly in the twenty-first century, is the transformation in the global media system. The development of digital media technologies, social media platforms, and global news networks has made mega-sports events more visible worldwide, while simultaneously leading to the rapid spread of political and ethical criticisms of these organizations on an international scale. Thus, mega-sports events have become not only tools for the production of positive images by states, but also global stages for debates on human rights, democratization, and freedom of expression (Boykoff, 2022).

One of the striking findings of the research is that contemporary sportswashing discussions are particularly concentrated in the context of Gulf countries. In particular, the investments made by states such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in major sporting events in recent years, their acquisitions of international

sports clubs, and their increasing influence within the global sports economy have led to the widespread adoption of the sportswashing concept in academic and media literature (Reiche & Sorek, 2019). In this process, sports investments have often been considered not only as economic ventures but also as international image management strategies.

However, research findings reveal that such practices are not entirely new historically. In particular, there are significant structural similarities between Nazi Germany's controlled image strategies towards international public opinion during the 1936 Berlin Olympics and contemporary sportswashing practices. The temporary reduction of antisemitic propaganda materials during the Berlin Olympics, controlled public space arrangements for foreign visitors, and the presentation of the event as a display of modernity can be considered early historical examples of the use of sporting events to overshadow political criticism (Large, 2007).

Similarly, research findings show that the Cold War Olympics also reinforced the historical basis of contemporary sportswashing debates. In particular, the use of sporting events by the United States and the Soviet Union to generate ideological superiority and international prestige contributed to the institutionalization of sport as a tool for global visibility (Riordan, 1977). This demonstrates that sporting events became not only arenas for sporting achievement but also political platforms where states symbolically represented their legitimacy within the international system.

One of the key findings of the study is that the concept of contemporary sportswashing is academically controversial. While some researchers emphasize the explanatory power of the concept, others argue that it is used overly normatively and is often applied politically selectively. For example, Lenskyj (2000) argues that mega-sports organizations have long been linked to political and economic power relations; however, the concept of sportswashing can sometimes devolve into a reductionist discourse targeting only specific states. Therefore, throughout the study, historical examples were not directly labeled as sportswashing; instead, they were considered as historical antecedents of contemporary sportswashing practices.

Research findings also demonstrate that mega-sports organizations are integrated with modern neoliberal globalization processes. Today, the Olympics and other mega-sports events have transformed into large economic systems centered not only on states but also on multinational corporations, global media organizations, and international sponsorship networks (Miller et al., 2001). This situation extends the discussion of sportswashing beyond state policies, making it necessary to evaluate sports organizations within the context of global capitalism and the media economy.

One of the study's striking findings is that the sportswashing controversy has brought the Olympic movement's discourse of "political neutrality" back into the spotlight. While the International Olympic Committee has historically maintained that sport is above politics, the research findings show that sporting organizations have long been intertwined with propaganda, diplomatic competition, and international image-building processes (Hill, 1992). In particular, host country selections, sponsorship policies, broadcasting rights, and global media strategies reveal that sporting organizations are directly linked to political and economic power relations.

The research also highlights the ethical dimension of contemporary sportswashing debates. Human rights organizations and the critical sports studies literature emphasize that mega-sports events are often linked to labor rights violations, forced displacement, security policies, and freedom of expression issues (Boykoff, 2013). Large infrastructure projects and security practices, in particular, have made the societal costs of these organizations more visible. Therefore, sports organizations not only generate international prestige but also create serious ethical and political debates.

When evaluated in light of the research findings, contemporary sportswashing practices emerge as part of broader political representation processes that have historical continuity. The fundamental element that has changed is not so much the political function of sports organizations, but rather the fact that this function has become more visible and controversial in the global media environment. Thanks to modern communication technologies, mega-sports events are no longer merely image-building tools for states; they have also become international media events where global ethical debates and political critiques intensify.

The overall findings of the study demonstrate that the concept of sportswashing should not be considered merely an exceptional practice associated with contemporary authoritarian regimes. Rather, the study reveals that the use of sports organizations for international visibility, propaganda, diplomatic representation, and symbolic legitimacy is a structural feature that has persisted throughout the historical development of the modern Olympic movement. Therefore, discussions of contemporary sportswashing should be evaluated within the broader context of political transformations in modern sports history.

5. Recommendations

Future studies should further examine the historical relationship between sportswashing, sport diplomacy, and mega sport events through comparative analyses involving different international organizations and host countries. In addition, more extensive use of archival materials, official Olympic documents, and historical media records would strengthen the historiographical depth of the field. Interdisciplinary approaches combining sport history, international relations, sociology, and media studies should also be encouraged in order to better understand the political and cultural functions of mega sport organizations. Finally, international sport governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee should adopt more transparent and ethically accountable policies regarding human rights, freedom of expression, and governance in mega-event hosting processes.

6. Discussion

The main objective of this research is to evaluate contemporary sportswashing debates within the historical development of the modern Olympic movement, revealing the historical continuity of the use of sports organizations for political image production,

propaganda, and symbolic legitimacy. The findings of the research demonstrate that the relationship between sport and international politics is not merely a new development unique to the contemporary era; rather, mega-sports organizations have been systematically used by states for international visibility and political representation since the early periods of modern sports history.

One of the key points of discussion in this research is that, although the concept of sportswashing is often associated with contemporary authoritarian regimes in the literature, similar political strategies emerged historically much earlier. In particular, in the media and international relations literature, sportswashing is mostly discussed through contemporary examples such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or Russia (Reiche & Sorek, 2019; Boykoff, 2022). However, this study demonstrates that the use of sports organizations for international image management is not merely an exceptional development of the contemporary era; it has become a structural feature of the modern Olympic movement.

Research findings indicate that the 1936 Berlin Olympics, in particular, constituted a critical turning point in the history of modern sports. The Berlin Olympics stand out as one of the most visible historical examples of the use of sporting events for international propaganda and the production of political aesthetics. Nazi Germany viewed the event not only as a sporting activity but also as a large-scale propaganda platform that could present Germany as a modern, disciplined, strong, and orderly state to the global public (Large, 2007). In particular, architectural arrangements, media strategies, and the use of visual aesthetics significantly expanded the political representation capacity of sporting events.

In this context, the research shows that the political influence of sports organizations does not stem solely from direct propaganda messages. When evaluated in line with Debord's (1995) approach to the spectacle society, mega-sports events become large symbolic performance arenas where states dramatize their political power. Opening ceremonies, mass choreographies, architectural projects, and media broadcasts enable states to create controlled visual narratives for international public opinion. In this respect, the Berlin Olympics can be considered one of the historical starting points of the modern mega-event aesthetic.

Another important point of contention revealed by the research is that the Cold War era institutionalized the role of sport in international politics. Particularly after the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, the Olympic Games transformed into a global arena for ideological competition between capitalist and socialist blocs. The achievements of athletes were interpreted not only as individual performance but also as an indicator of the superiority of the political systems they represented (Riordan, 1977). This process made the function of sports organizations in propaganda and the production of international prestige more systematic.

The research also shows that during the Cold War, sports organizations integrated with media technologies, transforming into global propaganda arenas. Thanks to the spread of television broadcasting, the Olympic Games became global media events followed by billions of people worldwide (Roche, 2000). This dramatically increased the

international visibility capacity of sports organizations and further strengthened the diplomatic and ideological value of sport. Therefore, the emergence of contemporary sportswashing discussions is directly related not only to transformations in state policies but also to changes in the global media system.

One of the key findings of the research is that mega-sports events have transformed into economic and political projects alongside neoliberal globalization processes. Especially since the 1990s, the Olympic Games have become not just a sporting event, but a major economic project aimed at city branding, attracting global investment, developing tourism, and accelerating international capital flows (Miller et al., 2001). This transformation has turned sports organizations into important components not only of state policies but also of the global capitalist system.

In this context, the research shows that discussions about sportswashing cannot be limited solely to state-centric explanations. Mega sports organizations have now transformed into complex structures directly linked to multinational corporations, global media organizations, sponsorship networks, and international financial systems. According to Horne and Manzenreiter (2006), mega sports organizations are among the cultural visibility mechanisms of global capitalism. Therefore, the political functions of sports organizations cannot be evaluated independently of economic globalization.

The research findings also highlight the ethical dimension of contemporary sportswashing debates. Human rights violations, labor rights issues, security policies, and freedom of expression debates have become integral parts of mega-sports events. The controversies that emerged particularly during the Qatar 2022 World Cup demonstrate that sports organizations, while generating international legitimacy, are also subjected to intense ethical criticism (Reiche & Sorek, 2019). This situation reveals that sports organizations today not only generate prestige but also deepen global political debates.

One of the striking findings of the study is the contradiction between the International Olympic Committee's historically maintained discourse of "political neutrality" and the practical functions of the organizations. Although the IOC continues to argue that sport is above politics, historical examples show that the Olympics have long been intertwined with propaganda, diplomatic competition, and international visibility processes (Hill, 1992). This situation seriously calls into question the traditional approach that sport is a completely apolitical field.

The research also raises discussions regarding the analytical limitations of the concept of sportswashing. While some academics emphasize the explanatory power of the concept, others argue that sportswashing is sometimes used in a normative and politically selective manner. In particular, while mega-sports organizations of Western states are often explained with concepts such as "soft power" or "nation branding," the labeling of similar practices as "sportswashing" in different geographies leads to discussions of conceptual inconsistencies. Therefore, this study examines the concept of sportswashing from a historical continuity perspective, evaluating the political functions of sports organizations within a broader structural context.

When evaluated in light of the overall findings of the research, contemporary sportswashing practices indicate continuity rather than a historical break. Modern sports organizations have long been used for propaganda, diplomatic visibility, international legitimacy, and the production of symbolic power. The fundamental change is not so much the political function of sports organizations, but rather the fact that this function has become more visible and more intensely discussed in the global media environment.

7. Conclusion

This study aims to examine contemporary sportswashing debates within the historical development of the modern Olympic movement, revealing the historical continuity of the use of sports organizations for political image production, international visibility, and symbolic legitimacy. The research findings demonstrate that the use of sport for political purposes is not merely a new strategy unique to the contemporary era; rather, mega-sports events have been systematically used by states for propaganda, diplomatic representation, and the production of international prestige since the early periods of modern sports history.

One of the most important findings of the research is that the Olympic Games have increasingly become a global political arena within the modern international system. Initially founded on the themes of international peace, friendship, and apolitical sporting competition, the Olympic movement, particularly throughout the twentieth century, has become one of the symbolic platforms used by states to influence international public opinion. The increased global visibility of the Olympics, fueled by the development of mass media, has significantly enhanced the diplomatic and political value of the organizations (Roche, 2000).

Research findings indicate that the 1936 Berlin Olympics, in particular, constituted a critical historical turning point in the use of sport for international propaganda and image management. Nazi Germany viewed the Olympics not only as a sporting event but also as a large-scale propaganda platform through which the regime could present its discourses of modernity, order, discipline, and national power to the global public (Large, 2007). The use of architectural design, media strategies, mass ceremonies, and visual aesthetics, in particular, redefined the political functions of modern mega-sports events. In this respect, the Berlin Olympics can be considered one of the historical precursors to contemporary sportswashing discussions.

Another important conclusion reached by the study is that the Cold War era institutionalized the politicization of sport. Especially after the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, the Olympic Games became a global stage for ideological competition between capitalist and socialist blocs. The achievements of athletes were interpreted not only as individual performance but also as indicators of the superiority of the political systems they represented (Riordan, 1977). Thus, sporting organizations became one of the important tools in the struggle for international prestige; states tried to generate global legitimacy and diplomatic visibility through sporting success.

The research also shows that the economic and cultural functions of mega sporting events have expanded with the process of globalization. Especially since the 1990s, the Olympic Games have become an important part of city branding, attracting global investment, developing tourism, and national brand building strategies (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). In this process, sporting events have been directly linked not only to sporting success but also to economic competitiveness, media visibility, and international cultural representation.

When evaluated within the framework of the soft power approach developed by Joseph Nye, mega-sports organizations have become strategic tools that allow states to increase their influence within the international system through cultural appeal and symbolic representation (Nye, 2004). Research findings reveal that sports organizations function not only as a mechanism for competition but also as a mechanism for producing appeal and visibility in modern international relations.

However, the study also shows that contemporary sportswashing debates are not limited solely to the production of positive images. Human rights violations, labor rights issues, security policies, freedom of expression debates, and neoliberal urbanization processes have made the ethical and political dimensions of mega-sports events more visible (Boykoff, 2013). Especially in the digital media age, mega-sports events have become both an opportunity for global prestige and a field of intense international criticism for states.

One of the important findings of the research is that the concept of sportswashing cannot be evaluated independently of its historical context. The historical examples examined throughout the study show that the use of sports organizations for propaganda, diplomatic visibility, and international image building is a long-standing structural feature of modern sports history. Therefore, contemporary sportswashing practices indicate continuity rather than a historical break.

The research also shows a significant contradiction between the International Olympic Committee's historically maintained discourse of "political neutrality" and the practical political functions of mega-sports organizations. Although the Olympic movement officially argues that sport is above politics, historical examples reveal that sports organizations have long been intertwined with processes of international propaganda, ideological representation, and diplomatic competition (Hill, 1992). This necessitates a reassessment of the traditional approach that sport is a completely apolitical field.

When evaluated in light of the overall findings of the research, contemporary sportswashing debates should be considered within the broader context of political transformation processes in modern sports history. In the modern international system, sports organizations are not only arenas for athletic performance; they are also global media events central to the processes by which states generate international visibility, symbolic power, diplomatic prestige, and political legitimacy.

This study also opens up important areas of discussion for future research. In particular, comparative analyses of different mega-sports organizations, media representation processes, global sponsorship networks, human rights debates, and

studies on the political dimensions of sports economics can increase the historical and theoretical depth of the sportswashing literature. In addition, a more detailed examination of the relationship between the political neutrality discourses of the International Olympic Committee and other international sports institutions and the practical political functions of these organizations also seems important for future research.

In conclusion, the study reveals that the role of sports organizations in modern international relations needs to be rethought. Throughout history, the Olympic Games have functioned not only as sporting events but also as symbolic platforms where propaganda, diplomacy, cultural representation, and global power relations are made visible. Therefore, contemporary sportswashing discussions should be evaluated not only through contemporary political examples but also within the long-term structural transformations of modern sports history.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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