

**SPORT AS A TOOL FOR SEPARATIST PROPAGANDA: THEORETICAL
APPROACHES AND PRACTICAL COUNTERMEASURES
(CASE STUDIES OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN AND UKRAINE)**

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Abstract. This paper examines the phenomenon of using sport as a means of promoting separatist sentiments and legitimizing territorial occupations. It analyzes the transformation of sport from a domain of leisure and fair competition into a political technology aimed at identity construction and the recognition of unrecognized entities. Special attention is given to the classification of sports organizations operating outside official international federations. Based on the policies of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Ukraine – both facing Russian-backed separatism and occupation – the study identifies key strategies for countering sports separatism and mechanisms for protecting national interests in the international sports environment.

Keywords: *sport and politics, separatism, propaganda, soft power, unrecognized states, Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine, Crimea, ConIFA, Olympic Charter*

Introduction. In the modern world, sport has long transcended purely competitive activity. It represents a social institution with enormous mobilization potential and the ability to influence mass consciousness. One vector of this influence is the cultivation and spread of separatist movements, often sponsored or exploited by external actors. The relevance of the topic is driven by the growing number of ethno-political conflicts and attempts by non-state actors – and sometimes aggressor states – to use the global media field of sports events to promote their narratives. The aim of this study is to analyze the mechanisms of using sport as a means of separatist propaganda and to examine

specific examples of counteracting this phenomenon, focusing on the experiences of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Ukraine. Both states have for decades faced attempts to legitimize separatist regimes and temporary occupations on their territories through sports platforms, with Russia playing a key role in the Ukrainian case.

Aim of the study – to identify the main technologies of using sport for separatist purposes and to systematize the response strategies of affected states (cases of Azerbaijan and Ukraine), with particular attention to the incident at the 2026 Olympic Games involving Armenian figure skaters and the Russian-organized football competitions in occupied Crimea.

Results and discussion.

Institutionalization of alternative sports. A key role in legitimizing separatist movements through sport is played by international non-governmental organizations that create alternative infrastructure for unrecognized entities. Structures such as ConIFA (Confederation of Independent Football Associations) provide a platform for national teams that are not members of FIFA, representing unrecognized states, ethnic minorities, and isolated territories. Participation in tournaments like the ConIFA World Cup gives these entities attributes of statehood (flag, anthem, national team) and allows them to announce themselves on the international arena, which constitutes direct propaganda of separatism. Although formally these organizations declare social development and support for indigenous peoples, they perform a political function, undermining the principle of territorial integrity enshrined in the UN Charter.

Mechanisms of propaganda. Analysis of political practice reveals several main technologies for using sport for separatist purposes:

- 1) creation of alternative national teams and leagues (e.g., under ConIFA);
- 2) use of separatist symbols and narratives at official tournaments (flags, anthems, toponyms);
- 3) holding competitions on occupied territories without the consent of the legitimate government;
- 4) media coverage to broadcast separatist slogans to a wide audience.

Case study of Republic of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has long faced attempts to use sport to undermine its territorial integrity in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The country has developed a comprehensive strategy including diplomatic responses, legal arguments, and information countermeasures.

2004 chess tournament: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested a chess tournament organized in occupied Nagorno-Karabakh with foreign participants, emphasizing that any event on Azerbaijani territory without Baku’s consent is illegal.

2016 football match under ConIFA: The MFA called it a “football parody”, stressing that ConIFA is not recognized by any official football body, thus delegitimizing the event.

2026 Olympic Games incident: The National Olympic Committee of Azerbaijan filed an official protest with the IOC because Armenian figure skaters Karina Akopova and Nikita Rakhmanin used music titled “Artsakh” (the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh) in their free program at the Milan Olympics. The Azerbaijani NOC argued that the term “Artsakh” embodies the ideological essence of an illegal separatist policy and constitutes political propaganda, violating Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter. This incident demonstrates that separatist propaganda has moved to a new level – using cultural codes (names and symbols) in creative performances, requiring international federations to pay increased attention to the context of athletes’ presentations. Notably, the composition “Artsakh” had been used by Armenian athletes in four previous Olympics.

Case study for Ukraine – Russian-sponsored sports separatism in Crimea and Donbas. Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the occupation of parts of Donbas, identical tactics were employed by the Russian Federation. Russia organized football competitions on the Crimean peninsula, creating a so-called “Crimean Premier League” and forcing local clubs to withdraw from the Ukrainian football system. In 2015, a self-proclaimed “Crimean national football team” played a friendly match against a Russian club

team and later sought recognition from ConIFA. Moreover, in the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia facilitated the creation of separate “republican” football leagues and attempted to organize matches involving these teams under the guise of “humanitarian projects”.

Ukraine responded with systematic diplomatic and legal action. The Football Federation of Ukraine (FFU) filed official complaints with FIFA and UEFA, leading to a landmark decision by the UEFA Emergency Panel on 4 December 2014, which banned Crimean clubs from participating in any Russian competitions. The decision reaffirmed that the territorial integrity of a member association (Ukraine) must be respected. Later, in 2019, UEFA extended the ban, prohibiting Crimean clubs from playing in any competition organized by the Russian Football Union. Ukraine also submitted protests against attempts to register the so-called “Crimean national team” with ConIFA, highlighting that such actions legitimize illegal annexation.

These Ukrainian efforts demonstrate that the logic of sports separatism is universal, regardless of the aggressor. In both the Azerbaijani and Ukrainian cases, the aggressor (or its proxy) uses alternative tournaments, occupied territory infrastructure, and symbolic representation for propaganda purposes.

International context. Similar processes occur worldwide. For example, in Senegal, the football club Casa-Sports from the Casamance region was used by separatists as a space for “imagining and representing the nation” (Deets, 2015). This confirms that the mechanism works across geographic and cultural contexts.

Conclusions. The policies of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Ukraine demonstrate a comprehensive approach to countering sports separatism, including:

- 1) diplomatic response (notes of protest to international federations);
- 2) legal argumentation (appeal to international law and sports organization statutes);
- 3) information counteraction (exposing the propaganda nature of actions).

However, the effectiveness of this struggle directly depends on the position of international sports institutions. The principle of “sport neutrality” enshrined in the Olympic Charter requires not just declarations but effective

mechanisms to prevent the use of global sports arenas for spreading separatist ideology. As long as structures like ConIFA continue their activities and athletes use ambiguous symbolism at official events, the problem of sports separatism will remain acute and require further scientific and diplomatic efforts from affected states. The Ukrainian case also highlights the need for a special mechanism to address situations where an aggressor state directly organizes sports competitions on occupied territories – a challenge that goes beyond traditional separatist movements and involves state-sponsored propaganda.

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