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**Romanian Sports Diplomacy at the Olympics in the 1980s:  
A Waste of Chalk?**

THESIS IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR A DEGREE IN  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE  
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Jan-Julius Goeijenbier, 2274833

Supervised by: Dr. Paschalis Pechlivanis

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates *how the performance of Romania at the Olympics in the 1980s affected the international image of the Ceaușescu regime*. Focusing on the impressive success of Romania at the Summer Olympics in Moscow and Los Angeles during the 1980s, this thesis finds that the Ceaușescu regime purposefully used sports as a tool to shape its international image. As a guiding compass in the analysis, this work lays out and utilises a conceptual framework of sports diplomacy. By triangulating this with existing historiography and Dutch and American newspapers, it enquires how impactful this mobilisation of athletic achievements was in modifying Romania's image abroad. Acknowledging and supporting the shift in academia towards smaller states as subjects of Cold War research, this work aims to improve the conceptual relationship between sports and diplomacy within IR as well as contribute to the historiography on Romanian foreign policy during the Cold War.

**Key words:** Sport in IR, Sports Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, Communist Romania, Cold War, Olympic Games.

## **Acknowledgements**

The quote that opens the introduction is a very suitable description of my experience writing this thesis. Much like Romanian minister Haralambie Alexa however, I write this with a smile. In this case, this is partially because of pride but mostly out of gratitude for the opportunity to pursue my studies in something I deeply enjoy as well as the tremendous support along the way. To begin with where this thesis started, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Paschalis Pechlivanis for his supervision and guidance, but also for his stimulating classes that inspired this work. I also would like to give a shout out to my peers from the thesis group Meryem van Gelder, Ivan McConville and Peter Ferretti, who provided important feedback. As important as ever, I am eternally grateful to my family and in particular my mother, who always facilitated and stimulated me throughout my academic endeavours. Finally, my close friends and my partner Melina Ankel were of great support, as they provided me with their invaluable advice and ample moments of relaxation.

## **List of abbreviations**

<b>COMECON</b>	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
<b>CPR</b>	Communist Party of Romania
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IOC</b>	International Olympic Committee
<b>IR</b>	International Relations
<b>LAOOC</b>	Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee
<b>MFN</b>	Most Favoured Nation
<b>RGF</b>	Romanian Gymnastics Federation
<b>ROC</b>	Romanian Olympic Committee
<b>UEFA</b>	Union of European Football Associations

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## Introduction

When asked about the possibility of separating sports and politics at a press conference during the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Romanian minister of Sports Haralambie Alexa responded with a smile: “It is a bit hard.”<sup>1</sup> The vagueness and sanctimony in his response speaks volumes, especially since the Communist Party of Romania (CPR) under the helm of President Nicolae Ceaușescu actively used sports to advance its position in domestic and foreign politics.<sup>2</sup> Although the mixing of sports and politics is generally frowned upon, they mutually influence each other whether fans like it or not.

In 2022, this was demonstrated once again at the Winter Olympics in Beijing when several Western states decided not to send governmental delegations because of the alleged Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the hosting of the Winter Olympics was embraced by the Chinese Communist Party as an opportunity to polish up their international image.<sup>4</sup> Even more recently, the UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) decided to move the 2022 Champions League Final from St. Petersburg to Paris and cancel the sponsorship of Gazprom, because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> In ending its associations with Russia, the UEFA dealt a blow to the Russian promotion of culture and business. In practice, the mixing of sports and politics therefore enjoys plenty of evidence. This is nothing new and already occurred during classical antiquity, to which we thank the modern-day metonym ‘bread and circuses’. In the more recent history of the Cold War, sport became an extension of the bipolar struggle, as ideologies clashed and competed on every front.<sup>6</sup> The power of sport to engage foreign audiences is thus also understood by governments across the globe, both in past and present times. Its international dimension, the cultural aspect, and the peaceful values namely make sports an efficient vehicle for political efforts abroad, a potential that was very much realised by the Romanian government during the 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this connection has also been discussed extensively in International Relations (IR). For instance, several handbooks have underlined the utility of sport in foreign

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Romania’.

<sup>2</sup> Adam, ‘Football and Authoritarianism in Twentieth Century Romania’, 661; Rusu and Cuza, ‘Sport and Politics-Unilateral or Joint Interests? Romanian Case’, 509; Wilson Jr, ‘The Golden Opportunity’; Petracovschi, ‘Propaganda and Censorship for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games’, 2047.

<sup>3</sup> Kanno-Youngs, ‘U.S. Will Not Send Government Officials to Beijing Olympics’.

<sup>4</sup> Zhong, Fan, and Herrmann, ‘The Impact of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on China and the Olympic Movement’.

<sup>5</sup> Agini, ‘Paris to Host Champions League Final after Russia Stripped of Event’.

<sup>6</sup> Wagg and Andrews, *East Plays West*.

<sup>7</sup> Dubinsky, ‘From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy’.

policy through case studies on Chinese ping-pong diplomacy in the 1960s or British diplomacy and the Olympic movement throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> Other authors have wide-ranging opinions about this utility, varying from characterising sport as a facilitator of national identity building and international status to seeing sport as a religion-like phenomenon that influences international relations.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, sport has been established as a theme and has received ample discussion, which this work aims to contribute to.

For instance, Levermore and Budd published an editorial volume exclusively on the conceptual relation between sports and IR.<sup>10</sup> They argued, along with other academics, that even though sport and international politics mutually affect each other, IR had ignored this discipline during much of the Cold War.<sup>11</sup> Due to the dominant realist paradigm that did not have much consideration for societal and cultural dynamics, sport has mostly been approached from economic, historical, and sociological disciplines.<sup>12</sup> Dichter and Johns extended the argument for sport as a significant factor in IR, demonstrating through historical cases how states have exploited the diplomatic utility of sports.<sup>13</sup> That sport can bridge between communities, explains in part why it is also deployed as a diplomatic tool.<sup>14</sup> Simon Rofe and Scott-Smith explored the relationship between sport and diplomacy in more detail, extending the quest of Dichter and Johns.<sup>15</sup> They emphasise how sport is used as a diplomatic tool between states, by focusing on international sport institutions, the hosting of sport events, politically motivated boycotts of sport events, and the use of sport as a means of public diplomacy. In doing so, significant links are drawn between sports and diplomacy on a conceptual level.<sup>16</sup> They advocate for further research to be conducted, as previous research has mostly concentrated on the superpowers of the Cold War.<sup>17</sup> Another angle for further research is provided by Murray, who posits that the complexity of sports and diplomacy problematises their combination.<sup>18</sup> This is also visible in the inconsistent use of concepts when referring to the politization of sports for foreign policy purposes. Some academics namely refer

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<sup>8</sup> Rofe and Scott-Smith, *Sport and Diplomacy*; Budd and Levermore, *Sport and International Relations*.

<sup>9</sup> Cha, 'Role of Sport in International Relations'; Redeker, 'Sport as an Opiate of International Relations'.

<sup>10</sup> Budd and Levermore, *Sport and International Relations*.

<sup>11</sup> Allison and Monnington, 'Sport, Prestige and International Relations'.

<sup>12</sup> Budd and Levermore, *Sport and International Relations*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Dichter and Johns, *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations Since 1945*.

<sup>14</sup> For sports as bridging factor, see: Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Rofe and Scott-Smith, *Sport and Diplomacy*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Beacom, *International Diplomacy and the Olympic Movement: The New Mediators*; Budd and Levermore, *Sport and International Relations*.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, 'The Two Halves of Sports-Diplomacy'.

to soft power, as others refer to propaganda or public diplomacy.<sup>19</sup> In overcoming this conceptual issue and answering the call for further research beyond Cold War superpowers, this work will put forward a clear conceptual framework of sports diplomacy, which is also suitable for cases involving smaller states in which the yielding of significant geopolitical influence is less tangible.

Regarding the Cold War, sport fits perfectly into the ideological power struggle between the superpowers. As George Orwell wrote in his essay *the Sporting Spirit*, “[sport] is war minus the shooting.”<sup>20</sup> In the absence of direct war between the US and USSR, sport thus formed an alternative platform of contention. In academia, historical research on sport during the Cold War has therefore focused mostly on the big powers.<sup>21</sup> However, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union, historiography beyond the West has boomed thanks to the increased access to archival material.<sup>22</sup> Due to the democratization of, previously totalitarian, socialist states, primary sources and other sources of information became available.<sup>23</sup> This also applies to the topical nexus of sport and diplomacy. European states and soft power have been studied more and more, demonstrating that the US and USSR were not the only states using sports as a political tool.<sup>24</sup> Other scholars have extended this shift away from the US and USSR as the primary topics of Cold War studies in the realm of sport, proving for instance that smaller states made significant contributions to cross-bloc connections.<sup>25</sup> Within the topic of sports diplomacy during the Cold War, smaller states have thus increasingly received attention. In the case of the Olympics however, the superpowers are still the primary focus. This work aims to counter that by investigating the impact that Romania’s performance at the Olympics during the 1980s had on its international image. In doing so, it will also deepen the theoretical relationship between sports and diplomacy by looking at the impact of performance on the international image of a state.

The case of Romania stands out due to their impressive achievements, which live on in Romanian society to this day.<sup>26</sup> In the 1980s, Romanians saw their athletes achieve an overall

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<sup>19</sup> Dubinsky, ‘From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy’; Nygård and Gates, ‘Soft Power at Home and Abroad’; Freeman, ‘Sport as Swaggering’.

<sup>20</sup> Orwell, ‘The Sporting Spirit’.

<sup>21</sup> Dichter and Johns, *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations Since 1945*; Parks, *The Olympic Games, the Soviet Sports Bureaucracy, and the Cold War: Red Sport, Red Tape*; Rider, *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy*; Wagg and Andrews, *East Plays West*.

<sup>22</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*.

<sup>23</sup> Autio-Sarasma, ‘A New Historiography of the Cold War?’, 658.

<sup>24</sup> Óscar J. Martín García and Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Machineries of Persuasion: European Soft Power and Public Diplomacy During the Cold War*.

<sup>25</sup> Vonnard, Sbeti, and Quin, *Beyond Boycotts*.

<sup>26</sup> Petracovschi and Terret, ‘From Best to Worst?’



second place at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and state-run football club Steaua Bucharest became the first Eastern Bloc team to win a European Cup. Given the relatively small population of 22 million and their globally insignificant economy, these were outstanding performances. Arguably, these achievements had a positive impact on the domestic image of Ceaușescu, who was facing a noticeable decline in popularity.<sup>27</sup> Although the unique role of Romania in the Cold War has received sufficient attention, there has not been much academic work on their use of sport for their benefit in foreign politics.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, there are a few works that provide useful insights into the dynamics between sports and culture in Romania domestically. In separate articles, Poenaru and Faje explore how football provided an oasis of popular culture in a state that was ruthlessly repressed by the neo-Stalinist regime.<sup>29</sup> Both emphasise the paradoxical role of football in Romanian society; Football was first seen by Ceaușescu as a capitalist sport, but he then began to exploit it for the benefit of his regime. Adam extends this idea of football functioning as ‘bread and circuses’, as it provided a softening of the hardship the population experienced due to the stringent economic policies.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, he explains how sport, including football, was adopted as a confirmation of the idea of socialist superiority, a cornerstone of Ceaușescu’s regime. This not only had a domestic influence, but it also was a conscious aim in foreign policy as Ceaușescu’s gradual international isolation sought to advance its image for economic and political gain.<sup>31</sup>

Petracovschi, a leading scholar on sport in communist Romania, has done more thorough research on Romania at the Olympics in the 1980s.<sup>32</sup> She has analysed the dynamics within the CPR that preceded the participation of Romania in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, primarily by focusing on the information campaigns of the party through Romanian newspapers.<sup>33</sup> In these campaigns, the press places sport and the participation in the Olympics

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<sup>27</sup> Adam, ‘Football and Authoritarianism in Twentieth Century Romania’, 661.

<sup>28</sup> On Romania’s role in the Cold War, see: Deletant, “‘Taunting the Bear’”; Deletant and Ionescu, ‘Romania and the Warsaw Pact’; Deletant, *Romania under Communism*; Pechlivanis, *America and Romania in the Cold War*; Dragomir, ‘Romania Turns West’; Dragomir, ‘The Perceived Threat of Hegemonism in Romania during the Second Détente’.

<sup>29</sup> Poenaru, ‘Soccer Stadiums and Popular Culture in 1980s Romania’; Faje, ‘Romania’.

<sup>30</sup> Adam, ‘Football and Authoritarianism in Twentieth Century Romania’.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 661; As well, see: Rusu and Cuza, ‘Sport and Politics-Unilateral or Joint Interests? Romanian Case’, 509; Hațegan, ‘Sports And the Ceausescu’s Regime – Propaganda’s Tool or Mass Physical Education?’; Wilson Jr, ‘The Golden Opportunity’; Petracovschi, ‘Propaganda and Censorship for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games’, 2047.

<sup>32</sup> Petracovschi and Chin, ‘Sport and Defection From Romania During the Cold War’; Petracovschi and Terret, ‘From Best to Worst?’; Petracovschi, ‘Daciada and Mass Sport during Communism in Romania as Reflected in the *Sport Magazine*’.

<sup>33</sup> Petracovschi, ‘Propaganda and Censorship for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games’.

in the context of the Ceaușescu-centred, neo-Stalinist ideology. Wilson on the other hand uses more of an international approach to Romania's participation in the 1984 Olympics, as he argues that Ceaușescu manipulated the US and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for economic and foreign policy gains.<sup>34</sup> However, the impact of Romania's golden era of sports on its international image remains unanalysed. For that reason, this work thus aims to fill this gap in the literature.

To that end, this research aims to combine the topics of sport in IR and Romania's exploitation of sport for foreign policy purposes, extending Cold War historiography on smaller states. Regarding the study of sport in IR, multiple scholars demonstrated the diplomatic use of sports through large events, boycotts, or bilateral engagements. Especially during the Cold War, many states attempted to bolster their image by investing in sports, but the impact of performance on their international position has not received much attention. Additionally, this work aims to improve the combination of sports and diplomacy, as it advances a conceptual framework that achieves more clarity between these two concepts. Concerning the research on sport and Romania, this work finds that plenty of scholarly work has discussed the use of sports as a political tool by the Ceaușescu regime. However, there is a lack of literature that asks how this very successful chapter in Romanian sports history has impacted Romania's international image and foreign policy.

Hence, the outcome of this thesis is twofold. Firstly, it deepens and clarifies the relationship between sport and diplomacy by developing a sports diplomacy conceptual framework. Secondly, it sheds a new light on Cold War history by investigating the relationship between sport and foreign policy in the case of Romania during the 1980s. It will do so by asking: *How did the performance of Romania at the Olympics in the 1980s affect the international image of the Ceaușescu regime?*

### Operationalization and methodology

The timeframe of this study concerns the final years of the Ceaușescu regime, specifically from 1980 to 1988. It focuses on the Olympic Summer Games in respectively Moscow and Los Angeles as well as relevant events surrounding those Games, but also includes the Olympics in Seoul. For this timeframe, three reasons exist. Firstly, this era marked the golden era of Romanian sports, as they reached seventh (1980), second (1984), and eighth (1988) place in

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson Jr, 'The Golden Opportunity'.

the overall medal ranking at these Olympics, which are their best achievements to date.<sup>35</sup> This was a consequence of an increased interest in sports by the Ceaușescu regime, which was signified by the establishment of national sporting competitions like the Daciada.<sup>36</sup> The Winter Games are left out of the equation, as Romania's achievements on ice and snow were insignificant. Secondly, cultural and sports diplomacy are achieved over the long term.<sup>37</sup> Thus, to gauge an impression of Romania's sport achievements on foreign audience, it is important to look at a longer timeframe. Lastly, every Olympics had a different context, both in the international and Romania's national sense. On one hand, boycotts caused different political and athletic playing fields in the lead up to every tournament, which had significant impacts on the performances that were delivered. On the other hand, thanks to increasingly neo-Stalinist tendencies and staggering austerity measures imposed by the Ceaușescu regime, the domestic situation was quickly worsening throughout the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> The latter factor is a particularly interesting variable for this research as the detriment it caused to Romania's international image exactly was what the CPR aimed to counteract.

In the analysis of this period and topic, this project will triangulate primary sources, scholarly literature, and a sports diplomacy conceptual framework over the course of three chapters. This process of triangulation is also reflected in the sub-questions that aid this research:

- I. *How can sports diplomacy explain the impact of Romania's Olympic performance on their international image?*
- II. *What was the political context, both internationally and for Romania, of these Olympic Games?*
- III. *What perception of Romania do Dutch and American newspapers depict?*

In the first chapter, the first sub-question will occupy a central role as it aims to establish a conceptual framework for sports diplomacy that is able to assess the impact of Romania's performance at the Olympics. As discussed, there is a lot of conceptual fuzziness within IR regarding the use of sports for international political means. This chapter therefore forwards a

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<sup>35</sup> IOC, 'Moscow 1980 Olympic Medal Table'; IOC, 'Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Medal Table'; IOC, 'Seoul 1988 Olympic Medal Table'.

<sup>36</sup> Petracovschi, 'Daciada and Mass Sport during Communism in Romania as Reflected in the *Sport Magazine*'.

<sup>37</sup> Cull, 'Public Diplomacy', 35.

<sup>38</sup> Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, 211.

clear definition of sports diplomacy, which it contextualises within related concepts of soft power and public diplomacy. It first discusses the differences between soft power and public diplomacy, as these are both concepts that engage with the international image of states. Subsequently, it places sports diplomacy in the extent of public diplomacy, after which it generates a definition from the existing scholarly work. By eventually linking sports diplomacy to performance and the international image, this research forwards a conceptual framework capable of understanding the impact of sports diplomacy in the case of Romania, and potentially in other cases in future research.<sup>39</sup>

The second and third chapter are both of empirical nature and engage with the other two sub-questions, through which the conceptual framework developed in the first chapter will serve as a guiding compass. The second chapter focuses on Romania at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. It puts forward a narrative of Romania's difficult quest for independence from Moscow, as Western newspapers still saw Romania as an integral part of the Eastern Bloc. Successively, it discusses how this tide slowly turned through the prowess and ability of Nadia Comăneci, who became the embodiment of the increasing use of sports diplomacy by the Ceaușescu regime. The latter was also addressed in the last section that looks at the aftermath of 1980 Olympics, during which acts of sports diplomacy alternated with defections. The third chapter concerns the peak of Romanian Olympism, which occurred during the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Starting with an analysis of how Romania capitalised on the boycott of the rest of the Warsaw Pact, it proceeds to explain how the Romanians adopted the Olympic ideals in the advancing of their image. As the previous two sections explained how the Romanian government paved the way for their athletes to consolidate their image, the next section concentrates on how the impressive Romanian achievements improved their international image according to foreign press. Lastly, the final section of the third chapter covers the decline of Romanian sports diplomacy in the lead-up to the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

In these two chapters, a wide array of secondary sources provides the historical context in both the international and Romanian sense, which will serve to enlarge the understanding of the primary sources. Existing historiography is essential to contextualise the historical developments surrounding the Olympic Games of the 1980s from both a Romanian and broader Cold War angle. The primary sources used are predominantly newspaper articles from the United States and the Netherlands, which provide a look into the perception those foreign audiences have of Romania. Both states are liberal democracies that have a free press and a

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<sup>39</sup> For the advantages of a conceptual framework, see: Jabareen, 'Building a Conceptual Framework'.

developed newspaper culture, which allows for a depiction of the image that those societies have of Romania. By selecting these two different states, the research avoids a one-sided perspective that could negatively influence the quality of its outcome. For instance, at the 1984 Olympic Games, hosted by the US in Los Angeles, Romania's attendance was economically incentivised by the American government.<sup>40</sup> Even though the press should operate separately from the government in the US, it could have been of influence in the coverage on an Olympic tournament on home turf. Additionally, the combination of the US and the Netherlands means that the perspective of both a superpower and a smaller state are involved. Given the prominent role of the US in the Cold War, this certainly is of help as the Dutch perspective is less involved in the Cold War dynamics, helping to put forward a more nuanced narrative of Romania at the Olympics in the 1980s.

This thesis uses articles from three Dutch and three American newspapers, dating from 1980 to 1989. On the Dutch side, *De Telegraaf* was and still is the largest daily newspaper. On the right of the political spectrum and of a slightly sensationalist nature, it has an expansive section on sports. *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant* are known as quality and trustworthy newspapers that have elaborate background articles, respectively on the centre-right and centre-left of the political spectrum. Due to their more intellectual approach, balanced political orientations, and their place in the top five newspapers in terms of circulation, they complement *De Telegraaf* well. On the American side, the media landscape is not characterised by national dailies of different political colouring as is the case in Europe and, therefore, the selection is based on geography. The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* are the daily newspapers of the two largest cities in the US. The *Washington Post* is relevant due to its close location to the political centre of the US.

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<sup>40</sup> Wilson Jr, 'The Golden Opportunity', 90.

## 1 Conceptualising Sports Diplomacy

As aforementioned, there is a lot of obscurity within International Relations on the dynamics between sports and politics. When discussing the politization of sports for international political means, one stumbles upon a fuzziness in which related concepts such as soft power, public diplomacy and sports diplomacy are used interchangeably.<sup>41</sup> The broadness of both sports and politics as independent entities makes their combination rather complex. On top of that, die-hard sports enthusiasts advocate for purity and argue that there is no place for politics within sports.<sup>42</sup> Organisations like the IOC echo this line of reasoning by promoting sports as a peaceful way of bringing the world together, but practice shows something else through for example the Olympic boycotts of the 1980s. Politics is everywhere, and, at least since the Roman bread and circuses, is also in sports. The unclarity stemming from this dichotomous relationship is reflected in academia, where terms as soft power and public diplomacy are both used to refer to the international political impact of sports. Next to that, because the paradigm in academia still is centred around the superpowers of the Cold War, this chapter advances a clear theoretical vantage point for this work that is suitable for smaller states. In doing so, it also aims to reduce the clutter in academia on concepts related to the use of sports, and in particular sports performance, in shaping the international image.

### 1.1 Soft power, public diplomacy, and the international image

In IR, there are several concepts that aim to analyse the international image of states. Soft power is undoubtedly the most famous. Joseph Nye put forward this term in 1990 as a tool to underline the importance of non-military and non-economic influence during the Cold War era.<sup>43</sup> The fundamental difference with hard power is that soft power revolves around attraction instead of coercion, as soft power is the ability to persuade others to want what you want. Soft power is inextricably linked to the international image of state since the element of seduction rests on the perception that other states have of the state in question. Soft power rests on three fundamental pillars: culture, political values, and foreign policy.<sup>44</sup> These three resources also produce the international image of a state, which in turn can be converted into the ability to co-

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<sup>41</sup> Examples are: Freeman, 'Sport as Swaggering'; Brannagan and Giulianotti, 'Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment'; Nygård and Gates, 'Soft Power at Home and Abroad'.

<sup>42</sup> Murray, 'The Two Halves of Sports-Diplomacy', 584.

<sup>43</sup> Nye, 'Soft Power'.

<sup>44</sup> Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 11.

opt other states into doing what you want. That nuance is therefore a crucial difference between soft power and the international image.

A vehicle to improve the international image of the state and to exercise soft power is public diplomacy. Like soft power, this concept finds its origins in the clash of ideology and culture that was the Cold War. According to leading scholar Nicholas Cull, this phrase was first used by Edward Gullion when he established the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy 1965.<sup>45</sup> Another pioneer in the public diplomacy field, Eytan Gilboa, defined the concept in line with Gifford Malone: “direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments”.<sup>46</sup> Cull opted for a different definition and described it as an act in which “international actors seek to accomplish the goals of their foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics.”<sup>47</sup> As both Gilboa and Cull note, public diplomacy entails an idea similar to propaganda, but due to its negative connotation Gullion opted for the term public diplomacy when establishing an academic centre. In general, its American origin is explained by the desire for a different term than propaganda, which was often associated with totalitarian regimes like Nazi-Germany or the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup> The Cold War thus marked the emergence of the concept, but academia has only focused on public diplomacy in more recent times.<sup>49</sup>

It should also be noted that public diplomacy is an entity of knowledge on its own and is not necessarily a subject within soft power. Public diplomacy uses pre-existing academic knowledge from disciplines such as IR, Communications, and Marketing and therefore departs from a different ontological standpoint than soft power.<sup>50</sup> Soft power is an inherent part of IR, whereas public diplomacy is also employed by other fields of study. Public diplomacy is a tool for creating soft power, just as it is a tool to influence the international image of a state. In this research, there is a deliberate choice made for the concept of international image instead of soft power, since soft power would imply the yielding of influence which was in the Cold War mostly limited to the superpowers. Instead, this work seeks merely to illuminate the impact of sport performance on the international image, which in this paper is defined as the perception that foreign publics have of a state, in this case Romania.

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<sup>45</sup> Cull, ‘Public Diplomacy Before Gullion’, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Gilboa, ‘Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy’, 57; Malone, ‘Managing Public Diplomacy’, 199.

<sup>47</sup> Cull, ‘Public Diplomacy’, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Guth, ‘Black, White, and Shades of Gray’, 311.

<sup>49</sup> Melissen, ‘Public Diplomacy’.

<sup>50</sup> Gilboa, ‘Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy’, 60–69; Melissen, ‘Public Diplomacy’, 196.

Regarding the theoretical composition of public diplomacy, Cull identified five categories through which it takes place: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting.<sup>51</sup> Particularly cultural diplomacy is of interest to this study which is, following Cull, defined as the promotion of cultural resources and achievements abroad for the purpose of improving the political position or international image of a state.<sup>52</sup> Since the definitions that academics have of public diplomacy differ and sport is strongly related to culture, this work uses this definition of cultural diplomacy as a vantage point when conceptualising sports diplomacy.

## 1.2 (Public) sports diplomacy conceptualized

Sports diplomacy consists of two expansive and independent concepts, which, similarly to sports and politics, somewhat problematizes their combination.<sup>53</sup> On one hand, sports diplomacy is seen as a highly effective tool to build bridges between nations thanks to its capability to transcend ethnic and cultural boundaries. On the other hand, sports should according to many fans stay clear of political exploitation and remain a pure form of athletic competition. What is evident however, is that international politics has been intertwined since antiquity with sports, due to the international, cultural, and competitive aspects of the latter.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, this complexity requires specificity when conceptualising sports diplomacy in the context of this thesis. As previously discussed, sports diplomacy can entail several things in the broader, more traditional diplomatic context, such as bilateral acts of diplomacy, the hosting of a large sports event or the role of international sport organisations.<sup>55</sup> Due to the international attention, cultural elements and peaceful nature, sport is however also an excellent vehicle for public diplomacy.<sup>56</sup>

Several academics have ventured to explore this type of political use of sports. In his monograph, Murray dedicates a section in his monograph to “public sports diplomacy”.<sup>57</sup> In doing so, he aims to distinguish acts of public diplomacy involving sports from ‘traditional’

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<sup>51</sup> Cull, ‘Public Diplomacy’, 35.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Allison and Monnington, ‘Sport, Prestige and International Relations’, 106; Dubinsky, ‘From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy’, 156; Murray and Pigman, ‘Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy’, 1098.

<sup>55</sup> For Traditional Sports Diplomacy: Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 60; For the list, respectively see: Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns, *Diplomatic Games : Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations Since 1945*; Beacom, *International Diplomacy and the Olympic Movement : The New Mediators*; Grix, ‘Sport Politics and the Olympics’.

<sup>56</sup> Dubinsky, ‘From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy’.

<sup>57</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 113–17.



diplomacy acts involving sports, which is what the largest part of his book is concerned with.<sup>58</sup> In his explanation of public sports diplomacy in the context of contemporary world politics, he defines it as the use of sport “by a [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] in order to engage, inform and create a favourable image amongst foreign publics and organisations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to the sending states diplomatic and foreign policy goals.”<sup>59</sup> According to Murray, the biggest strength of this strategy is that the universal appeal and accessibility of athletic competition can achieve more than cultural forms of diplomacy, since the reception thereof is often subject to national or ethnic variables.<sup>60</sup>

Other academics have composed works that specifically focus on sport as a public diplomacy tool. On one hand, Rofo and Scott-Smith present in their edited volume case studies that illuminate the use of this concept, such as how China improved its reputation with other socialist nations amidst the Sino-Soviet split through ping-pong. Although their book does not engage with the theoretical composition of sports diplomacy, they demonstrate the utility of approaching sport as a public diplomacy tool in both practice and analysis.<sup>61</sup> Dubinsky on the other hand, zooms in on the theoretical connection between the concepts of soft power, public diplomacy, and sports diplomacy. In doing so, he automatically conceptualises sports diplomacy as a public diplomacy tool and thus does not include other diplomatic uses of sports mentioned in the first paragraph of this section. He however agrees with Murray that the use of sports diplomacy can be more effective than cultural diplomacy due to the universality of sport, thereby countering Nye’s observation that soft power typically only works between states that share like-minded cultural norms and values.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, Trunkos and Heere also describe sports diplomacy as a type of public diplomacy, by directly attaching it to the definition of Gilboa of the latter concept.<sup>63</sup> Even though they refer to the concept as sport diplomacy as opposed to sports diplomacy, their chapter mostly functions as an overview for the purposes of sports diplomacy. A more expansive review of the concept itself was conducted by Kobierecki. He concluded that the debate on what sports diplomacy is, particularly in relation to public diplomacy, is rather fuzzy. From the debate, he derived the three most prominent types of sports diplomacy: The fostering

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Rofo and Scott-Smith, *Sport and Diplomacy*, 89–168.

<sup>62</sup> Dubinsky, ‘From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy’; Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

<sup>63</sup> Trunkos and Heere, ‘Sport Diplomacy: A Review of How Sports Can Be Used to Improve International Relationships’.

and shaping of (1) interstate relations, (2) the international image and prestige, and (3) diplomacy through international sports organisations.<sup>64</sup>

In short, there is no clear-cut consensus on the meaning of sports diplomacy within academia. Regardless of spelling or use of words, the clarity concerning the meaning and ontology of the concept are far more important. For two reasons, this work interprets sports diplomacy as the use of sports for public diplomacy purposes. Primarily, a theoretical concept requires clear demarcations in order to be applied correctly. Secondly, this work concerns the international image of a state and therefore requires a concept that is derived from public diplomacy, and not a concept that addresses “traditional” acts of diplomacy that involve sport, which often are aimed at gaining influence.

Thus, it will not include the broader diplomatic use of sports and will be seen as an extension of cultural diplomacy under the public diplomacy umbrella. To that end, sports diplomacy will thus be defined as the promotion of sportive resources and achievements abroad for the purpose of improving the political position or international image of a state. This is in line with the general paradigm in academia, as put forward by Dubinsky and Trunkos & Heere. On top of that, Murray’s phrase *public sports diplomacy* and Kobierecki’s second category of sports diplomacy refer to a similar interpretation of sports diplomacy.

### 1.3 Applying sports diplomacy to sport performance

Sports diplomacy is rarely used to analyse the impact of sport performance on the international image of a state. Nonetheless, many states consciously pursue this as part of their sportive policies. An example of this negligence within academia is given by Rofe and Scott-Smith. They envision an important role for “sporting prowess”, but do not elaborate on this any further.<sup>65</sup> Several other authors refer to performance in relation to the international image, but no work exists that places performance or achievements as an active means to achieve sports diplomacy.<sup>66</sup> For example, Freeman attaches performance in sport to soft power, as he argues how “swaggering” in sports can fortify a state its international position.<sup>67</sup> Regarding the Olympics, van Hilvoorde et al have studied the dynamics between national pride and high results in the overall medal-ranking, which in turn fortify nationalistic sentiments.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*.

<sup>65</sup> Rofe and Scott-Smith, *Sport and Diplomacy*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*, 117 & 133; van Hilvoorde, Elling, and Stokvis, ‘How to Influence National Pride?’

<sup>67</sup> Freeman, ‘Sport as Swaggering’.

<sup>68</sup> van Hilvoorde, Elling, and Stokvis, ‘How to Influence National Pride?’

Within sports diplomacy however, research on the influence of performance is lacking. This piece puts forward two root-causes for this academic shortfall. Firstly, many academics consider the positive relation between the international image and athletic achievements an obvious one. It is assumable to many that great success in a stadium or arena whilst representing a nation comes with international fame for both the athlete and the nation. Nonetheless, the same applies for a spectacular opening ceremony of an international sporting event, which has received plenty of attention in sports diplomacy theorizing.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, performance in sports deserves more attention in the field of sports diplomacy, since success in sport is understandable to everyone that is at the very purpose of competition. This ties into the second point: performance is inherent to sports due to its competitive nature, and hence is not illuminated explicitly within sports diplomacy frameworks. This aspect is also shared with diplomacy, where similarly yet logically poor efforts are disapproved and great work is lauded.<sup>70</sup> However, this inherence only increases the necessity of analysis, both for practitioners and academics, since performance is a key factor on every occasion sports diplomacy is used.

To that end, this work aims to deepen the concept of sports diplomacy by applying it to performance in the case of Romania. The Romanian case is an excellent match with this topic, since the CPR purposefully exploited sports for the bettering of their image, both nationally and internationally. In the application of this theory, there are several factors that should be considered. Primarily, as many academics also note, sports diplomacy, which is on the softer side of the power spectrum, is never as effective as harder means of power. Economic or military strength still prevails over great athletic achievements, and this work does also not aim to argue against that.<sup>71</sup> In the context of Romania, which was a state that did not possess a great army or flourishing economy, this should therefore be considered. Nonetheless, this work aims to steer away from that, since it aims to merely study the impact of sports on the international image of Romania, as opposed to arguing that sports yielded significant political influence or soft power, as disclosed earlier. A second pitfall that should be considered is the duality of sports diplomacy. Even if athletic achievements are amazing, these still take place within the context of the given state. In the case of Romania, this context was not particularly great, as

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<sup>69</sup>For example: Cha, 'Role of Sport in International Relations'; Beacom, *International Diplomacy and the Olympic Movement: The New Mediators*; Chen, Colapinto, and Luo, 'The 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony'.

<sup>70</sup> Murray and Pigman, 'Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy', 1103.

<sup>71</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 123.

Eastern European countries suffered strong criticism for their deteriorating human rights situations. In general, this duality problematizes acts of attraction like soft power and public diplomacy in the case of authoritarian states.<sup>72</sup> By drawing on an expansive body of secondary sources, the influence of these variables will certainly be considered. Thirdly, when looking at broader acts of public diplomacy that typically involve a sense of nationalism and culture, their transcendence is often troubled if the receiving audience does not share the same cultural values.<sup>73</sup> Athletic performance, however, does not rely on these values. Thanks to the universality of sports, sports diplomacy is more transferable than cultural diplomacy.

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<sup>72</sup> Barr, Feklyunina, and Theys, 'Introduction'.

<sup>73</sup> Dubinsky, 'From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy', 160.

## 2 Moscow 1980: The Warm-Up

Before Moscow 1980, the show at the Olympic Games of 1976 in Montreal was stolen by Romanian gymnast Nadia Comăneci when she became the first woman to receive a perfect score at the Olympics at just 14 years of age. Therefore, the Romanians did not arrive with a blank slate to Moscow. Thanks to Comăneci, Romania became the home of the next star gymnast, a reputation that previously belonged to Soviet Olga Korbut. This was not the only thing that a Romanian asserted from Moscow. Throughout the 1970s, the Romanian regime had increasingly sought to become more autonomous from the Soviet Union both in domestic and foreign politics.<sup>74</sup> The prime example of such autonomy was that Ceaușescu denounced Moscow's intervention in the Prague Spring in 1968, as he claimed the Soviets violated the independence of another country.<sup>75</sup> By the means of sports, Romania sought to establish itself as an independent and successful nation, by transcending a narrative of sophistication that was predominantly conveyed by Nadia Comăneci. For a large part, this countered the fact that Romania, regardless of its desire for autonomy, still participated in the Moscow Games, which were otherwise boycotted by many states. Intriguingly, this boycott occurred due to a similar violation of independence as what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968, when Bucharest chose to declare its condemnation.

### 2.1 Two images: Independent vs. Eastern Bloc member

The tumultuous path towards the Olympic Games of 1980 in Moscow was therefore mostly characterized by the boycott of 66 countries. The primary reason for the boycott was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, due to which the United States concluded that Moscow was not a suitable place to host a celebration of peace and Olympic community.<sup>76</sup> Many states, also outside of the traditional Western bloc, followed suit. Although most states decided to abstain in their entirety from competing in Moscow, other national Olympic committees still made their way to the Russian capital, not partaking under their national flag. Naturally, such a large boycott had an impact on the competition itself.

This is what Dutch and American press also noted. Next to the fact that many world-class athletes were not present, both the competition and the Olympic ceremony were portrayed

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<sup>74</sup> Deletant, "Taunting the Bear"; Dragomir, 'The Perceived Threat of Hegemonism in Romania during the Second Détente'.

<sup>75</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 258.

<sup>76</sup> Guttman, 'The Cold War and the Olympics Sport in World Politics', 560.

as a socialist family gathering.<sup>77</sup> The Los Angeles Times looked ahead of the games and ousted its concerns on the competitive authenticity of such an Olympic Games with so many world-class athletes in absence, referring to the gathering as a Soviet “Bloc Party”.<sup>78</sup> Regarding the festivities, an article in the Washington Post noticed a sense of “political acrimony” during the opening ceremony, which unsurprisingly was used by the Soviet Union for political purposes.<sup>79</sup>

In that sense, Dutch, perhaps even more than American press, framed the Games and its organiser as unfair. The boldest statement from the US concerned the bloc party that Romania was a part of, but the Dutch press noted that the Games were dominated by unsportsmanlike behaviour and a repressive atmosphere. One columnist sarcastically titled his piece: “The Games Are Amazing!”, while another wrote of a “hangover” he experienced not because of vodka but due to the unpleasant and unfair atmosphere in Moscow.<sup>80</sup> This frame also transcended to many other Eastern Bloc states, who were approached as being a part of the Soviet puppet show. Before the games had even started, Romania’s presence was thus already stained by prejudice, which would disadvantage any Romanian effort in using sports diplomacy to shape its desired national image to that of an independent state.<sup>81</sup>

The Eastern Bloc frame was thus also applied to Romania, who attended the Moscow Olympics in full capacity. Interestingly, the relation between Moscow and Bucharest was not a particularly warm one at that point, as the neo-Stalinist Ceaușescu aimed for a policy independent of the world’s superpowers. That independence also manifested in the economic policy that Ceaușescu pursued, as he did not agree upon increased economic cooperation between Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) states in 1971.<sup>82</sup> However, also on an international political level Ceaușescu’s valuation of independence was being heard. The denunciation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, following the Prague Spring, fostered political engagement with the West and the US, who noticed an opportunity to gain influence within the Eastern bloc.<sup>83</sup> Towards the end of the 1970s, Romania would increasingly reap the benefits of this non-conformist policy. On one hand, Bucharest would gain economic benefits from his engagement with Western institutions such as the International

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<sup>77</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Mixture of Pageantry, Acrimony’; De Telegraaf, ‘Op de Stip: Kater’; NRC Handelsblad, ‘De Spelen Zijn Geweldig!’

<sup>78</sup> Los Angeles Times, ‘Moscow Throws Its Bloc Party’.

<sup>79</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Mixture of Pageantry, Acrimony’.

<sup>80</sup> De Telegraaf, ‘Op de Stip: Kater’, 1980; NRC Handelsblad, ‘De Spelen Zijn Geweldig!’

<sup>81</sup> Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*, 107.

<sup>82</sup> Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War*, 190.

<sup>83</sup> Gorun and Branesco, ‘The Paradox of Nicolae Ceausescu’s Foreign Policy and Several Reasons for the Deterioration of the International Image of His Regime’.

Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, this non-confirmative attitude earned Ceaușescu and his regime the reputation of a “maverick”.<sup>85</sup> The courage embedded in that term tied into the image for Romania Ceaușescu desired: a successful and independent state.<sup>86</sup>

Even though the economic cooperation with the West was initially eagerly anticipated by the CPR, it would also have grave consequences for the Romanian regime at a later stage.<sup>87</sup> Independence, or autonomy, became a reoccurring theme within the Romanian foreign policy doctrine. As Elena Dragomir argued, the CPR’s foreign policy was not centred around anti-Sovietism, but around anti-hegemonism.<sup>88</sup> In the context of the bipolar Cold War, this would eventually contribute to the gradual isolationism that Romania became subjected to towards the second half of the 1980s.

In the Western press, Romania’s anti-hegemonic tendency and desire for ‘independence’ in world politics was not necessarily reflected in the coverage on the Olympic Games, as Romania was seen as an inherent part of the Eastern Bloc. This came to the surface in articles about the gymnastics competition, which was Romania’s best sport. The competition had obvious elements of dishonesty, in which Romania was involved as well. From articles in the Washington Post, it became apparent that judging controversies dominated the entire competition and concluded in Romania’s Nadia Comăneci being awarded two individual medals, because of diplomatic agreements amongst Eastern Bloc countries.<sup>89</sup> The team competition was seemingly already decided in favour of the Soviet Union, who avenged their loss against Romania at the previous World Championships, but with favourite Comăneci still being on track to win the overall individual medal not all was lost.<sup>90</sup> However, in the deciding event for the individual competition it was Soviet underdog Yelena Davydova triumphed, largely thanks to what was described as a conspicuous decision by the Soviet-dominated jury.<sup>91</sup>

Whilst American press mostly focused on the subsequent tantrum of Romanian coach Béla Károlyi, Dutch press was harsher and clearly condemned the judging controversies, which

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<sup>84</sup> Pechlivanis, *America and Romania in the Cold War*, 5.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 19; See also: Westad, ‘The Balkans’, 355; Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, 187.

<sup>86</sup> Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War*, 195; Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 277.

<sup>87</sup> Dragomir, ‘Romania Turns West’.

<sup>88</sup> Dragomir, ‘The Perceived Threat of Hegemonism in Romania during the Second Détente’.

<sup>89</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Comaneci Finally Wins Two Golds As Judging Controversies Continue’; The Washington Post, ‘Judges Wrangle, Romanians Furious’.

<sup>90</sup> De Telegraaf, ‘Jury Lief Voor Sovjet-Turnen’; The Washington Post, ‘Soviets Win Gymnastics Team Gold’; Los Angeles Times, ‘Comaneci Takes a Fall - and So Does Romania’; New York Times, ‘Women Stars Share Last Gymnastic Gold; 8 Medals for Dityatin’.

<sup>91</sup> De Telegraaf, ‘Turnjury Levert Knoeiwerk’; New York Times, ‘Miss Comaneci Loses To Russian as Result Is Marred by Dispute’.

continued into the individual gymnastics events.<sup>92</sup> NRC Handelsblad and De Telegraaf both were very cynical about these developments, as Romania was described as a pawn in the politically fixed competitions by the Soviets.<sup>93</sup> De Volkskrant took this narrative even further. Reporter Hans van Wissen wrote how Károlyi's anger suddenly disappeared, after he had been pressured, assumably by Russian and Romanian officials, to drop his threat of withdrawing the Romanian team from the competition in a response to the judges' decisions.<sup>94</sup> He also writes how Comăneci was awarded a golden medal on the beam to compensate Romania for their loss in the other competition, by a jury that consisted predominantly of Eastern European members, alluding to speculations of rigged competitions.<sup>95</sup> In an opinionated article recapping the Moscow Games, van Wissen writes that it was no surprise that Romanian gymnasts seemed so sad and meagre, as they had been underfed and forced to train excessively.<sup>96</sup> In the same paragraph, he refers to the administration of growth hormones to girls on the Soviet team, placing Soviet and Romanian in the same unethical category.

The latter was very much in line with the overarching narrative, in which Romania was seen as a participant in the political show of fellow Warsaw Pact member the Soviet Union. The descriptions of the opening show and the overarching theme of political orchestration that sometimes led to unfairness, as demonstrated by the gymnastics competition, forwarded a negative conception of the Moscow Olympics to the audience of the newspapers. Romania was seen as part of these judging controversies, but mostly as a victim who got the short end of the stick in the distribution of the medals. In that sense, Romania's desire to forward its desired image of independence was thus not fully achieved in these Games, as the Western press still saw Romania an integral part of the East.

From a conceptual perspective, this meant that Romania stumbled upon an inherent issue with sports diplomacy: duality. First, the act of sports diplomacy can be frustrated by the reputation of the state.<sup>97</sup> In this case, Romania attempted to show its prowess and ability to defeat the Soviets as a way of making a statement that intended to advance its image as an autonomous country. However, the totalitarian, socialist nature of the Romanian regime prevented this from occurring, as this caused them to be associated with the authoritarian

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<sup>92</sup> The Washington Post, 'Comaneci Finally Wins Two Golds As Judging Controversies Continue'; The Washington Post, 'Judges Wrangle, Romanians Furious'; New York Times, 'Miss Comaneci Loses To Russian as Result Is Marred by Dispute'.

<sup>93</sup> NRC Handelsblad, 'De Spelen Zijn Geweldig!'; De Telegraaf, 'Sovjet-Turnsters Ieiden'.

<sup>94</sup> De Volkskrant, 'Turn-Muiterij Onder Controle'.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> De Volkskrant, 'Spelen Zijn Niet Kapot Te Krijgen'.

<sup>97</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 249.



Soviets who were allegedly guilty of sportive malpractices. Second, given the competitive nature of sports, acts of sports diplomacy can be compromised due to acts of over-competitiveness, leading to anything but fair play. That sport is prone to such excessive behaviours and can contradict the decency that diplomacy is supposed to evoke, is also illustrated by Murray.<sup>98</sup> The Romanian gymnasts in this case attempted to showcase their country's ability in the hopes of advancing their status but this was diminished by the pre-determined verdicts of the judges. Exemplifying both these points, De Telegraaf noted that if there had not been a boycott and American or Western European judges had been part of the gymnastics jury, Romania likely would have received better scores as those judges would have favoured the Romanians.<sup>99</sup> Assumably, this speculation bore in mind the resistance Romania had offered the Soviet Union in international politics and the general dislike of the West for the Soviets, as well as the likeability Comăneci had derived from her amazing performance in Montreal 1976.

## 2.2 Nadia Comăneci: the chief sports ambassador

Even though the 1980 Moscow Olympics were already by default politically stained due to the boycott and other subsequent controversies, the athleticism was also appreciated in both American and Dutch press.<sup>100</sup> Regarding this athleticism, the predecessor to the Moscow Olympics, Montreal 1976, already saw the skill of the greatest Romanian gymnast of all time. In Montreal, the then-14-year-old Nadia Comăneci stunned audiences at home and abroad with three individual gold medals. The fame she derived from that performance certainly established Romania as an integral part of the Olympic tradition.<sup>101</sup> Although the gold medals were milestones, she is mostly remembered to be the first woman in gymnastics to ever get awarded a perfect score on the Olympic stage. Comăneci was set to achieve similar results in 1980 but she came one gold short of matching her previous performance. Even though gymnastics received most attention, Romania was also successful in canoeing, rowing, shooting and Greco-Roman wrestling, gaining four more golden medals. This meant that Romania ended up

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>99</sup> De Telegraaf, 'Sovjet-Turnsters Ieiden'.

<sup>100</sup> De Telegraaf, 'Roemenië Stuur Wereld-Turntop'; The Washington Post, 'Comaneci Picks Up Where She Left Off'; The Washington Post, 'Comaneci Finally Wins Two Golds As Judging Controversies Continue'.

<sup>101</sup> Petracovschi, 'Daciada and Mass Sport during Communism in Romania as Reflected in the *Sport Magazine*', 1572.

ranking 7<sup>th</sup> in the Olympics above Great Britain and France, which was quite impressive for a country with a population of 22 million.<sup>102</sup>

Great achievements at the Olympics were also very much welcomed by Bucharest, as they fit neatly in the ideology that was outlined by the CPR. Romanian society revolved around the nationalistic, neo-Stalinist ideology moulded around Ceaușescu's persona, of which also the anti-hegemonism was an important part.<sup>103</sup> Romania, regardless of East-West dichotomies, had to be a great country of its own. In the making of this country, sport had an important role, both for internal and external purposes. On one hand, sport made citizens into the ideal subjects of the multilateral developed society envisioned by Ceaușescu.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, sport on an international level was meant to market Romania to the rest of world, proving the success of Romania's socialism and to attract new opportunities amidst the financial peril the state had arrived in at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>105</sup>

An important moment in the exploitation of sport by the CPR was in 1977, when the first edition of the Daciada were held. These mass-sports events, of which the name was a nod to the ancient province of Dacia, were established by the CPR to contribute to creating an ideal society by fostering amateur participation in athletic activities.<sup>106</sup> With the establishment of these events, Ceaușescu proclaimed himself to be the great architect of mass-athleticism in Romania as well as the successes of Romanian sports to come, thus placing sports firmly within his leadership cult. Interestingly, he got his inspiration for the Daciada on state visits to China and North-Korea, which is traceable to the highly nationalistic name of the event.<sup>107</sup> This establishment of the Daciada also coincided with an increase in the CPR's interest in sports diplomacy. Success in sports can boast the image of a state, as it demonstrates vitality and prestige.<sup>108</sup> Thus, elite athletes are often used by governments for the sake of realising international recognition, meaning that they have a crucial role in the execution of sports diplomacy strategies.<sup>109</sup> After Comăneci's legendary performance in 1976, her potential for sports diplomacy was realised by the leadership of the party. Through her, Moscow 1980

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<sup>102</sup> IOC, 'Moscow 1980 Olympic Medal Table'.

<sup>103</sup> Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War*, 194.

<sup>104</sup> Petracovschi, 'Daciada and Mass Sport during Communism in Romania as Reflected in the *Sport Magazine*'.

<sup>105</sup> Regarding the international promotion through sports, see: Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*; Adam, 'Football and Authoritarianism in Twentieth Century Romania', 661; Regarding the financial peril, see: Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 286–90.

<sup>106</sup> Petracovschi, 'Daciada and Mass Sport during Communism in Romania as Reflected in the *Sport Magazine*'.

<sup>107</sup> Hațegan, 'Sports And the Ceausescu's Regime – Propaganda's Tool or Mass Physical Education?'

<sup>108</sup> Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*, 32.

<sup>109</sup> Hoberman, 'Sportive Nationalism and Globalization'; Trunkos and Heere, 'Sport Diplomacy: A Review of How Sports Can Be Used to Improve International Relationships', 11.,

became the moment when the political purpose of sports for national means broadened to cater to Romanian foreign affairs as well.

That the use of sports diplomacy abroad was gaining traction was also visible in the foreign press. Even though much of the gymnastics competition was the subject of negative coverage in the American and Dutch press, the judging controversies also created a degree of sympathy for Romania, and Comăneci in particular.<sup>110</sup> Regardless of her fall in the team competition, her achievements from Montreal were not forgotten by the press. As the favourite, American and Dutch press both spoke of her being the victim of the jury controversies during the all-round competition. The New York Times for instance reported on whole episode, including Károlyi's protests, but demonstrated through the subheading "Miss Comăneci's Loss to Russian Disputed" that it empathised with the Romanians.<sup>111</sup> The Post even noticed a slight sense of surprise amongst the audience present in the Lenin Sports Palace when it was announced that the opponent of Comăneci, the Russian Davydova, was awarded with the golden medal. The admiration of the foreign press was epitomized by that the Post referred to Comăneci's perfect score on the uneven bar as "unbelievable!".<sup>112</sup> Dutch newspapers generally appreciated the artistry of Comăneci as well. For instance, De Telegraaf referred to her uneven bar performance as "sublime".<sup>113</sup>

The name and appearance of Comăneci dominated the newspaper coverage on the Olympic gymnastics competition, much more than any other gymnast. The Los Angeles Times ousts its affinity for Comăneci by referring to her as simply 'Nadia', which is indicative of her fame. In that same edition, an article concerning her made up a large share of the front page.<sup>114</sup> In De Volkskrant, a rather large picture of the Romanian team was printed next to an article concerning the judging controversies.<sup>115</sup> These things show the attention she received, which indicates that Romanian sportive achievements were being noticed by American and Dutch press. It marked a contradiction as well, with Comăneci being a sparkle amidst the typically negative coverage that other aspects of the Games received. Nonetheless, it did mean that Romania, largely thanks to Comăneci being an icon of sporting prowess, was gaining recognition and thus advancing its image internationally.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> The Washington Post, 'Comaneci Picks Up Where She Left Off'; The Washington Post, 'Comaneci Finally Wins Two Golds As Judging Controversies Continue'.

<sup>111</sup> New York Times, 'Miss Comaneci Loses To Russian as Result Is Marred by Dispute'.

<sup>112</sup> The Washington Post, 'Judges Wrangle, Romanians Furious'.

<sup>113</sup> De Telegraaf, 'Sovjet-Turnsters Ieiden'.

<sup>114</sup> Los Angeles Times, 'Nadia Finally Wins Two Golds'.

<sup>115</sup> De Volkskrant, 'Turn-Muiterij Onder Controle'.

<sup>116</sup> Murray and Pigman, 'Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy', 1103.

### 2.3 Post-Moscow proliferation and defection

After the Moscow Games, the achievements of the Romanian gymnasts were not forgotten by foreign press. Nadia Comăneci had maintained much of her fame, which was also reflected in the coverage. When Comăneci embarked on her American tour in 1981, ‘Nadia ‘81’, this was extensively reported on by Washington Post journalist Bart Barnes.<sup>117</sup> This tour was particularly interesting, given the Romanian government’s policy on travelling to the West. Even though the beginning of his reign was described as a “honeymoon phase”, Ceaușescu’s regime would soon become significantly stricter.<sup>118</sup> The Securitate, following the events in Prague of 1968, tightened the policy regarding tourism for Romanian citizens, and it became much more difficult to acquire a passport for travelling to the West.<sup>119</sup> Considering the size of this operation and the approval required from the Securitate, the tour of Comăneci likely was organized by the CPR. This meant that this was a deliberate strategy in the promotion of her athletic prowess for the benefit of the regime, which is a common act of sports diplomacy.<sup>120</sup> It was scheduled to visit a total of eleven cities, accompanied by several other gymnasts including the American Kurt Thomas. In charge of leading the tour would be Béla Károlyi and his wife Márta. In her memoirs, Comăneci wrote that it was the initiative of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation (RGF), who were tasked by the government to raise around \$250,000.<sup>121</sup> The repressive nature of the regime and its role in the organisation of the tour were also reflected in the presence of the undercover Securitate, who were in disguise as Romanian journalists.

Nonetheless, Nadia ’81 was received with open arms by American organisers, particularly by the director of the Capital Centre in Washington. In talks with the Washington Post, he states that, even though another gymnastics competition was already taking place in town, he was very happy to welcome the Romanian delegation for this event as well. Bart Barnes noted that the collision of two events in the same weekend was testifying of the huge popularity that gymnastics has gained. This was further emphasised by the financial potential that the Capital Centre director saw in bringing the Comăneci tour to Washington, as he was quoted saying, “We couldn’t pass on a deal like this one.”<sup>122</sup> Hence, the appeal of Romanian

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<sup>117</sup> The Washington Post, “‘Old Lady’ Comaneci Still Champ”; The Washington Post, ‘Floored by Gymnastics’.

<sup>118</sup> Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War*, 190; See also: Abraham, *Romania since the Second World War*, 47–50.

<sup>119</sup> Petrescu, ‘Closely Watched Tourism’.

<sup>120</sup> For examples of the utility of tours, see chapters 6 and 7: Rofe and Scott-Smith, *Sport and Diplomacy*.

<sup>121</sup> Comaneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, 86.

<sup>122</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Floored by Gymnastics’.

gymnastics was also measurable financially, which reflected the significant interest people abroad had.

That Comăneci was a respected and admired figure, was very much emphasised by Barnes in an article reflecting on the Nadia '81 exhibition. Whilst almost running out of compliments, he describes how she had become the world-wide symbol of “gymnastic excellence, youth and beauty.”<sup>123</sup> Barnes reminds his audience also of the long list of achievements and prizes Comăneci has on her name and demonstrates awareness of her impact on international audiences. Noting the lack of TV coverage of Moscow 1980 in the US, he states that the Romanian was still very much in the “hearts and minds of the American public.”<sup>124</sup> In another article, Comăneci’s inspirational prowess was seen as the main cause for the surge in enrolment at American gymnastics schools.<sup>125</sup> The tour was also taken as an opportunity to familiarize the foreign audience with other members of the Romanian team, as they were given plenty of showtime as well. This can also be seen in the TV coverage the tour received on their stop in Madison Square Garden in New York City, which was supplemented with an interview with Comăneci.<sup>126</sup> The fact that this tour visited Madison Square Garden was very significant, since it entailed Romanian gymnastics got a podium in arguably the most famous arena in the world. On top of that, the coverage of this tour stop was shared on Good Morning America, which was and still is one of the most popular TV-programmes in the US.

However, defections at the end of the tour prevented Nadia '81 from becoming a perfect act of Romanian sports diplomacy. The coaching couple, Béla and Márta Károlyi, along with the main choreographer of the gymnastics team, Géza Poszar, did not join the rest of the squad for their return flight and requested political asylum in the United States on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March in 1981. In answering the press, Béla Károlyi explained how the RGF intervened in the coaching process, as Romanian authorities realized what an asset to the nation Comăneci was after her stellar performances in Montreal.<sup>127</sup> The unorthodox training methods of Károlyi’s school in the small Transylvanian town of Deva and their grand successes had to be controlled by the increasingly authoritarian government, because nothing could be bigger than the socialist society. Comăneci wrote about the friction between Károlyi and the Romanian officials in her memoirs and remarked that his raging protests at the Moscow Olympics had

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<sup>123</sup> The Washington Post, “‘Old Lady’ Comaneci Still Champ’.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Romanian Gymnastics Trainers Defect’.

<sup>126</sup> Gyngold07, *1981 Nadia Comaneci Gymnastics Tour*; MizMamie, *1981 Nadia Tour Gymnastics*.

<sup>127</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Romanian Gymnastics Trainers Defect’.

compromised his situation in Romania. His rebellion led to the cutting of funding of his school in Deva by the centralised sporting organs, and the stripping of his title as national head coach.<sup>128</sup> For the Károlyi's and Poszar, this meant that they were left with no choice but to defect. Although Károlyi remained composed in his words to the American press concerning his situation in Romania, the fact that people wanted to flee Romania was certainly not beneficial to the image the CPR desired.<sup>129</sup> The concerns that the CPR had with issuing passports for travelling to the West were justified and it seemed the more authoritarian the regime would act, the more it would backlash, as subsequent years would show.

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<sup>128</sup> Comaneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, 87.

<sup>129</sup> The Washington Post, 'Romanian Gymnastics Trainers Defect'.

### 3 Los Angeles 1984: The Grand Finale and Cool-Down

The previous chapter demonstrated that Moscow 1980 was eclipsed by the boycott that occurred, which in some ways negatively affected Romania. Even though the playing field at Los Angeles '84 was again hampered by a boycott, this time of Warsaw Pact members, Romania would come to use this in its favour. When the Soviet Union announced its boycott because of concerns for their athletes' security, much of the Warsaw Pact and aligned states followed suit. In total, 14 Eastern Bloc nations would decide to abstain from competing at the 1984 Games, but Romania decided to do the contrary by eventually sending its Olympic delegation to California. In doing so, Ceaușescu continued the policy of anti-hegemonism that he was pursuing. However, the deteriorating economic situation in the country was also a large reason for seeking new ways to establish itself on the map of international politics. This explains the politization of the Los Angeles Olympic Games by the CPR, in which ample use was made of sports diplomacy.

#### 3.1 The Soviet boycott and Romanian opportunism

When the Soviet Union and other Warsaw pact nations announced their boycott, Romania remained rather silent and took their time to navigate this decision from a political perspective. This was also noted in the press, as contradicting reports came out during the preceding months regarding Romania's presence. After the Soviet Union announced their boycott on the May 8<sup>th</sup>, pressure on its allies mounted.<sup>130</sup> In Dutch and American press, suspense concerning the Romanian presence was also building. In reports on the Soviet Boycott on May 9<sup>th</sup>, various newspapers wrote that Romania would be present nonetheless.<sup>131</sup> However, uncertainty would dominate the news in the following weeks, as an official statement by the Romanian government was lacking. A week and a half later, The LA Times described how the IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch was far from hopeful about Romanian participation, as IOC technical director Walther Troeger noted that political pressure from Moscow on Bucharest was severe.<sup>132</sup> In the same context, De Telegraaf also spoke of "Kremlin-Pressure".<sup>133</sup> A cause

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<sup>130</sup> The Washington Post, 'Risk to Athletes Alleged'; De Volkskrant, 'Lord Killanin: "De Sovjet-Unie? Ik Weet Toch Wat Koude Oorlog Is"'.

<sup>131</sup> The Washington Post, 'Risk to Athletes Alleged'; New York Times, 'MAJOR EFFECT SEEN'; De Telegraaf, 'Roemenië Gaat Wel'; De Volkskrant, 'Moskou Mijdt Olympische Spelen'.

<sup>132</sup> Los Angeles Times, 'Boycott'.

<sup>133</sup> De Volkskrant, 'Lord Killanin: "De Sovjet-Unie? Ik Weet Toch Wat Koude Oorlog Is"'.

for this perceived pressure was the conference of Warsaw Pact allies, including Romania, in Prague to discuss their policies and a possible alternative to the Olympics.<sup>134</sup>

Whilst foreign press had been expecting Romania's final decision, it appeared that the Ceaușescu regime delayed the announcement of its presence until after the Warsaw Pact conference.<sup>135</sup> It was already during that conference, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, that Peter Ueberroth, chair of the Los Angeles Organising Olympic Committee (LAOOC), claimed that Ceaușescu had assured him personally of their presence.<sup>136</sup> But only when Alexandru Siperco, the Romanian vice-president of the IOC, confirmed Romania's participation, the press could rest assured. After being summoned back to Bucharest, Siperco eventually announced the "logical" presence of Romania at the LA Olympics.<sup>137</sup> According to him, Romania namely was a core participant in the Olympic tradition, as they had always contributed athletes to the competition.<sup>138</sup>

The way the Romanian leadership navigated the Soviet boycott testifies of their political opportunism, as they politicized their athletic resources for the bettering of their own national position. To begin with, the pressure that Romania received from the Soviet Union was not as big as indicated in the press.<sup>139</sup> As Wilson observed, the newspapers did not deliver much of an explanation on the pressure exerted by Moscow and, according to a former Romanian official, meetings between Ceaușescu and the Soviet ambassador rarely addressed the Olympics.<sup>140</sup> This illusion of Russian pressure was thus merely the result of the suspense created by the Romanian government, as their deviation from the boycott was just a small annoyance for the Kremlin. In comparison, earlier anti-hegemonic ventures of Ceaușescu such as the denunciation of the 1968 Soviet interference during the Prague Spring or the structural divergence in Warsaw Pact policy infuriated Moscow much more.<sup>141</sup> Nonetheless, the response of the press was still justified to some extent, given the leverage the Soviet Union had over Romania in their economic relations.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> New York Times, 'Soviet Bloc Plans Meets in Summer'.

<sup>135</sup> The Washington Post, 'Romania Delays Decision, Cuba Is Likely to Join Boycott Today'; De Volkskrant, 'Roemenië Verkeert Nog Steeds in Dubio'.

<sup>136</sup> 'Roemenië Gaat Zeker Naar Los Angeles'; De Telegraaf, 'Roemenië Blijft Bij Zijn Standpunt'.

<sup>137</sup> Los Angeles Times, 'Defiant Romania to Send Team: Bucks Soviet Pressure to Join Games Boycott'; NRC Handelsblad, 'Roemenië Wel, Rest Oostblok Niet Op Spelen'.

<sup>138</sup> New York Times, 'Rumania Decides to Take Part in Games'.

<sup>139</sup> De Volkskrant, 'Lord Killanin: "De Sovjet-Unie? Ik Weet Toch Wat Koude Oorlog Is"'

<sup>140</sup> Wilson Jr, 'The Golden Opportunity'.

<sup>141</sup> Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War*, 196.

<sup>142</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 278.



Even more so, Romania still made the step, albeit a symbolical one, to ignore the Soviet hegemony, in line with its anti-hegemonic policies. This move was lauded and appreciated in the press, mostly across the Atlantic. The LA Times for instance, wrote how Romania courageously ignored the Russian pressure and even provided their article on the decision with the heading “Defiant Romania to Send Team”.<sup>143</sup> Linking this to the overarching narrative of pressure on Romania, Romania is portrayed as independent from Moscow. Thus, the Ceaușescu regime successfully shaped Romania’s image as a courageous, independent country, by simply waiting with providing clarity on its participation. This attitude was rewarded almost immediately, as Romanians were subsidised heavily by the LAOOC and IOC to make their presence possible.<sup>144</sup> Although it was said that this was necessary since they could not share transportation or equipment with other Warsaw pact states, it is suggestive of cunning opportunism in the politization of their presence.<sup>145</sup>

This was particularly necessary from an economic perspective, as Ceaușescu was also seeking new economic impetus after the country had defaulted in 1981.<sup>146</sup> However, due to the domestic, repressive style of governance, the Ceaușescu regime struggled to solidify its relations with the West, and the US in particular, which were required for economic revival. The Romanian population was experiencing severe food rationing as part of strict austerity measures devised to wipe out the regime’s foreign debt.<sup>147</sup> The subsequent increase of repression coupled with austerity resulted in a human rights catastrophe that began to raise red flags with Western states. This was particularly the case in the US, where engagement with Romania had already been an issue during the Carter presidency because of its emphasis on human rights.<sup>148</sup> This situation thus required alternatives to improve its international image and economy, which explains the Romanian commitment to the Olympic Games. Romania thus used the Olympics to advance its image for the sake of political and economic gains, which is a key strategy of sports diplomacy.<sup>149</sup> In the short term, economic gains were realised immediately. The president of the LAOOC Peter Ueberroth, after the Romanians had committed to their presence in LA, wrote to the US Secretary of State George Schultz to urge the US government to assist Romania economically. This request was more than honoured by

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<sup>143</sup> Los Angeles Times, ‘Defiant Romania to Send Team: Bucks Soviet Pressure to Join Games Boycott’.

<sup>144</sup> New York Times, ‘Rumania Received Subsidy’; De Telegraaf, ‘Roemenen Gesponsord’; De Volkskrant, ‘Olympisch Geld Voor Roemenen’.

<sup>145</sup> Wilson Jr, ‘The Golden Opportunity’, 98.

<sup>146</sup> Abraham, *Romania since the Second World War*, 58–61.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>148</sup> Pechlivanis, *America and Romania in the Cold War*, 140–63.

<sup>149</sup> Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*, 107.

the more lenient Reagan administration, who successively prioritized the pending renewal of certain trade deals with Romania.<sup>150</sup> Looking at a longer timeframe, Romania's attendance certainly bore fruit since Romanian trade with the West in 1984 grew by 7.3% in 1984, the first growth in four years.<sup>151</sup>

### 3.2 The use of Olympism in shaping the Romanian image

The extent to which the Romanian regime embraced the Olympic platform as a means of advancing sports diplomacy was clearly visible in how Romanian officials interacted with the international press. Two key figures in this regard were Alexandru Siperco and Haralambie Alexa, as they were both advocates for Romania's place in the Olympic tradition. Siperco, who had a seasoned career in the IOC, had risen through the ranks to become the vice-president of this international organization. From that position, he was instrumental in the Romanian politization of the Olympic Games to show its independence from Moscow, which the previous section also illustrated by Romania's calculated response to the Warsaw Pact boycott.<sup>152</sup> To the Washington Post and NY Times, Siperco explained that Romania had always been an inherent part of the Olympic tradition and thus was set on participating: "Romanian sportsmen have taken part in all Olympic action organized by the International Olympic Committee up to now".<sup>153</sup>

Haralambie Alexa, president of the Romanian Olympic Committee (ROC) and Romanian minister of Sports, extended this narrative even further in his responses to the international press: "We have not been pressured by Moscow. Every Olympic committee has been able to independently make a decision. We will always make an effort for the preservation of the Olympics."<sup>154</sup> In a more expansive interview with the Washington Post, he frequently affirmed the reporter of Romania's independence, referring to Romania's historical struggle for independence that started in the classical age. Connecting independence to Romania's commitment to the Olympic values, he added: "The principle of Olympism was upheld independently and consciously in all responsibility."<sup>155</sup> The consciously political approach of the Romanian government surfaced in Alexa's vision of the role Romanian athletes as well,

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<sup>150</sup> Wilson Jr, 'The Golden Opportunity', 90.

<sup>151</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 290.

<sup>152</sup> Ionescu and Terret, 'A Romanian within the IOC', 1185.

<sup>153</sup> The Washington Post, 'Alternative Games Set; Romania to Attend L.A.'; New York Times, 'Rumania Decides to Take Part in Games'.

<sup>154</sup> De Volkskrant, 'Roemenie Tevreden Na Inspectie in Los Angeles'.

<sup>155</sup> The Washington Post, 'Romania'; Los Angeles Times, 'Romania: Mission of Peace at Games'.

which he framed neatly into the ideology of the Ceaușescu regime. According to him, the Romanian athletes had an ambassadorial function: “They have our mandate as emissaries to strengthen friendship between countries. ... [expecting their participation to make] a modest contribution to the defence of peace in the world.”<sup>156</sup> Within sports diplomacy, athletes and the discipline and virtue they embody occupy an important role in the promotion of their country.<sup>157</sup> This applied to the Romanian athletic envoys to LA as well since they were expected to honour Romania’s culture and history through their achievements. 1984 was a particularly special year since it marked the 40-year anniversary of the toppling of the fascist ruler Ion Antonescu that made room for the CPR’s ascent to power. According to Alexa, this was cause that had to be celebrated with special achievements.<sup>158</sup>

As Dubinsky argued, the universal appeal of sports due to the cultural, international, and peaceful elements make it an excellent vehicle for public diplomacy.<sup>159</sup> Siperco and Alexa both show Romania’s awareness of this diplomatic utility of sports, and even point out Romania’s commitment to these elements. Coupling the deviation from the Warsaw pact to Romania’s adherence to Olympism, including its international and peaceful values, they advance the international image of Romania as independent state. A state that, independent of and opposed to the Soviet Union, made the decision to partake in the biannual celebration of sports as a bonding factor in humanity. In the illustration thereof, Alexa uses a part of Romanian culture by referring to his country’s historical quest for independence that was already happening during the time of the Roman empire and the ancient province of Dacia, an idea that was an integral part of Ceaușescu’s nationalism.<sup>160</sup> Such a narrative of historical independence is a cornerstone of the CPR’s ideology and in this case is adopted for the external purpose of creating a desirable image of the Romanian state.<sup>161</sup>

### 3.3 Romanian performance: words into action

Through Siperco and Alexa, the Romanian government contextualized Romania’s participation into their desired international image, paving the way for its athletes to turn these words into action. Because of all the attention that Romania received for the defiance of the

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<sup>156</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Romania’.

<sup>157</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 103; Trunkos and Heere, ‘Sport Diplomacy: A Review of How Sports Can Be Used to Improve International Relationships’, 11.

<sup>158</sup> Respectively: Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 26; Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War*, 182; New York Times, ‘Rumanians Walk the Tightrope’.

<sup>159</sup> Dubinsky, ‘From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy’.

<sup>160</sup> Crampton, *The Balkans Since the Second World War*, 194.

<sup>161</sup> Respectively: *Ibid.*; Kobierecki, *Sports Diplomacy*, 107.

boycott, the pressure on its athletes increased both from home and abroad. Nonetheless, the decision to participate paid off significantly, as the Romanian delegation yielded impressive results. Romania reached second place on the medal ranking at the end of the games, which was in part explained by the absence of sportive powerhouses East-Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>162</sup> Romania excelled in gymnastics, rowing, weightlifting, and athletics, collecting a total of 20 golden medals, which marked the best result the Romanians had ever achieved at any Olympics. These performances yielded international appreciation for Romanian athleticism that benefited Romania's image abroad. However, one athlete that did not even perform was of great significance as well in this process.

For smaller nations, famous athletes, especially when retired, are of great use as informal ambassadors as they have already represented their country most of their life.<sup>163</sup> This strategy suited Romania especially well, given the limited economic means at their disposal in 1984. The key envoy in conveying the desired image, perhaps the most famous Romanian athlete of all time, would again be Nadia Comăneci during these Olympics. The fame she built up since her perfect score in Montreal was still noticeable in the wake of the LA Olympics. On May 6<sup>th</sup> 1984, she wove her final goodbye to competitive gymnastics in a specially held competition in Bucharest, which received considerable attention in the presence of IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch as well as through coverage of international media.<sup>164</sup> Her career was also honoured in the US through the bio-pic 'Nadia', which showed the unorthodox training methods in Romania as well as glorified her athleticism on American television.<sup>165</sup> Although the American directors were often obstructed by the Romanian government during the production by the Securitate, the film affirmed Comăneci's mythical reputation and promoted Romanian gymnastics nonetheless, as it was even shown at an event as famous as the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>166</sup> The film did however expose a certain duality in Comăneci's role as a Romanian sportive envoy, which is a reoccurring theme with envoys of sports diplomacy. It juxtaposed athletic excellence with societal repression.

Although seemingly contradictory, such a duality does not have to be detrimental, as Murray also signifies by pointing out the success of track and field legend Jesse Owens as an American envoy of African American descent in times of racial segregation.<sup>167</sup> To some extent,

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<sup>162</sup> IOC, 'Los Angeles 1984 Olympic Medal Table'.

<sup>163</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 106.

<sup>164</sup> New York Times, 'Tearful Comaneci Farewell'.

<sup>165</sup> The Washington Post, "'Nadia'".

<sup>166</sup> Los Angeles Times, 'The Comaneci Story's Hard Path To The Screen'.

<sup>167</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 103.

this would also be the case with Comănesci and Romania. She would be at the centre of public excitement when her attendance of a press conference as honorary guest of the LAOOC sparked rumours of her lighting the Olympic flame.<sup>168</sup> Even though those rumours did not turn out to be true, she did get awarded a position on the IOC's Athletes' Commission.<sup>169</sup> Comănesci's role ahead of the games ensured that Romania kept hold of the public eye before even any flame had been lit. In that, the LAOOC aided Romania by validating the Eastern Balkan country's presence even further by bestowing such honours on the key envoy of Romanian sports diplomacy, whose performances at previous Olympics merited all of this. The latter was also affirmed in a large piece by the New York Times which concluded, which reminisced how her "fiery acrobatics electrified much of the world eight years ago".<sup>170</sup>

After Comănesci reminded audiences around the world of earlier Romanian success, it was up to the partaking athletes to live up to the bar that had been set. In the absence of athletes of East-Germany and the USSR, Romanians became the chief opponents of the American hosts. When the Romanian delegation of 128 athletes marched in, the crowd in the Coliseum cheered and broke into a standing ovation with an enthusiasm that was unprecedented for a socialist state on American soil.<sup>171</sup> In the gymnastics competition, Béla Károlyi was now on the American side coaching Mary Lou Retton against her Romanian challenger Ecaterina Szabo. Understandably, American press vouched for Retton but also criticised Károlyi, who was again explicitly unhappy with the verdicts of the judges.<sup>172</sup> Romania was at the end of the day supreme and collected the golden medal in the team competition and on four other apparatuses, largely thanks to the 17-year-old Szabo. Lawrie Mifflin of the New York Times reported that the Romanians received just as much applause for their performances as their American colleagues, and even "a noisy ovation during the medal ceremony."<sup>173</sup> Such appreciation was echoed in Dutch papers, as De Telegraaf wrote that Romania had conquered the team medal "beautifully".<sup>174</sup> In that way, Szabo thus maintained the appreciation for Romanian gymnastics that Comănesci yielded by continuing to project an image of Romania as a successful nation.<sup>175</sup> Next to gymnastics, rowing was also a very successful discipline for the

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<sup>168</sup> De Telegraaf, 'Ontsteekt Extoptmter Olympische Vlam?'; New York Times, 'Lighter of Flame Remains a Mystery'; The Washington Post, 'Comaneci Arrival Fans Speculation on Flame'.

<sup>169</sup> De Telegraaf, 'Nadia Comaneci'.

<sup>170</sup> New York Times, 'Nadia Comaneci Still Glows as Images of 1976 Recede'.

<sup>171</sup> In this recording of the television broadcast by American channel ABC, skip to 1:51:49: News from the Past, *Games of the XXIII Olympiad, Opening Ceremonies, July 28, 1984*.

<sup>172</sup> New York Times, 'Szabo of Rumania Earns 3 Golds'.

<sup>173</sup> New York Times, '2 Americans Receive 10's'.

<sup>174</sup> De Telegraaf, 'Roemenië Fraai Naar Turngoud'.

<sup>175</sup> Wood, 'Superpower: Romanian Women's Gymnastics during the Cold War', 128.

Romanians as their rowers returned to Bucharest with five golden medals, partially because the event had suffered significantly from the boycott.<sup>176</sup>

Regardless of the competitive consequences of the boycott, the Romanian investments in sports and the use of it as a tool to better its image bore significant fruit. The regime had in earlier years devised a sports programme that consisted of the construction of athletic facilities and the centralised organisation of competition.<sup>177</sup> Without heroic achievements that rewarded those investments, the boycott would have been substantially less forceful as a political move. In that, both success from the past and the present were instrumental. Foreign press was aware of this factor. The LA Times even states that “Gold medals came second” for the Romanian team, referring to the political mission the athletes were on. An anonymous Romanian official admitted that the Romanians principally wanted to show Romania’s independence from Moscow.<sup>178</sup> Romanian athletes were very conscious of their primary job as envoys for Romania. In a conference that looked back at the LA Olympics, Elena Grigoras gave a striking comparison with the preceding Games: In Moscow, it was nice, but in Los Angeles it was beautiful.”<sup>179</sup> Ion Draica, gold medallist in wrestling, added to this that and said that American-Romanian relations “[had] been good all along.”<sup>180</sup>

That the Romanian convergence of their politicised participation and excellent performances had been a successful way of improving their image was proven by an article on the front page of The Washington Post. Contextualising the Romanian medals in the same historical narrative of independence as Haralambie Alexa did, it explains the Romanian need for independence and “their grudge against Slavic Russians.”<sup>181</sup> Moreover, it acknowledges the investments made by the Ceaușescu family in sports and points out that, according to anti-communist activists, “human-rights abuses in Romania do not appear to be as flagrant as in some other eastern European countries.”<sup>182</sup> The latter epitomizes the very success of the Romanian campaign, as Romania, also in comparison to 1980, transformed its image to that of an independent and a ‘better’ communist country. This demonstration of benevolence which the participation in the international and peaceful festivities of the Olympics entailed showed Romania’s best side. A show that had to be put on, as the dire economic situation forced

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<sup>176</sup> New York Times, ‘Rumanian Women Row to Five Golds’; De Volkskrant, ‘Roemenië Profiteert Ten Volle van Boycott’.

<sup>177</sup> Rusu and Cuza, ‘Sport and Politics-Unilateral or Joint Interests? Romanian Case’, 509.

<sup>178</sup> Los Angeles Times, ‘For Romanians, Gold Medals Came Second’.

<sup>179</sup> Los Angeles Times, ‘Romania: Gold Medals Came Second’.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> The Washington Post, ‘Politics Polishes Romanians’ Olympic Medals’.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

Romania to demonstrate their suitability as a trade partner to the US, who were reconsidering the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status of Romania amidst the human rights concerns.<sup>183</sup> In other words, Romania capitalised on the utility of sports as a tool to shape its international image and position to the fullest and, in doing so, the performance of its athletes were crucial.<sup>184</sup>

#### 3.4 The decline of Romanian sports diplomacy

After the Los Angeles Olympics, the further deterioration of the domestic situation and the warming of the Cold War eroded Romania's position to an extent that rendered sports diplomacy ineffective. After 1984, the economic problems within Romania were worsening. Austerity measures by the CPR and the growing discontent amongst the Romanian populace only sparked further repression by the Securitate.<sup>185</sup> This sparked a lot of criticism from the West, who were concerned with the human rights offences by the Romanian regime. In the second half of the 1980s, this became even more apparent, as Ceauşescu's politics contrasted with the rest of the Eastern Bloc, where gradual openness and relaxation of socialism was implemented. Romania's rebellion against Soviet hegemony was thus not of use to the West and the US anymore, since the warming of the Cold War decreased the necessity of strategic engagement with Bucharest.<sup>186</sup> Therefore, Romania's isolation was marked by both internal and external developments that both were too detrimental to be countered by any form of athletic proliferation.

Internally, Ceauşescu's decision to repay Romania's foreign debt signified a sense of irrationality and megalomania that would increase in the years to come at the burden of the Romanians. By 1984, food rationing was implemented in the whole country and repression was mounting.<sup>187</sup> In other words, the push-factors for Romanians increased drastically, which was also noticeable in the increasing reports of defecting Romanians in Dutch and American press. After Béla Károlyi had already defected after the Moscow Olympics, a Romanian engineer took the LA Games as an opportunity to purposefully embarrass the Ceauşescu regime by defecting to the US.<sup>188</sup> This would not be the only person to make that step: International media reported widely on the political asylum request of a Romanian journalist on the 14<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>183</sup> Wilson Jr, 'The Golden Opportunity', 93.

<sup>184</sup> For this utility, see: Dubinsky, 'From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy', 162.

<sup>185</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 443.

<sup>186</sup> Abraham, *Romania since the Second World War*, 61.

<sup>187</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 288.

<sup>188</sup> The Washington Post, 'Romanian Engineer Defects'.

August of the same year.<sup>189</sup> In the second half of the 1980s, such reports would become more and more familiar for publics abroad.<sup>190</sup> Next to that, coverage on Romania turned to a more and more negative tone. A year after the Romanian success in LA, the polish of Olympic glory was wearing away. In articles published in 1985, the achievements at the previous Olympics and the deviation from the Soviet Union were eclipsed by reports on hunger and repression.<sup>191</sup>

Therefore, the domestic situation ostracised Ceaușescu from the rest of the world, but that did not stop the regime from promoting itself abroad. Thanks to initiative of an American gymnastics coach, an exchange program between Romanian and American junior gymnasts in 1985 was established.<sup>192</sup> The Romanian gymnastic association eventually opened their doors to 25 American junior gymnasts, thus making use of exchanges to promote the country's famous gymnastics schools. In sports diplomacy, exchanges can be an asset in reaching mutual understanding and friendship.<sup>193</sup> Another attempt of Romanian sports diplomacy took place in the beginning of 1988, when Romanian gymnasts went on a world tour.<sup>194</sup> Although its purpose was to engage with foreign publics, foreign press did not engage much with the tour, especially in comparison to previous Romanian gymnastic efforts of diplomatic nature. The fact that only *De Telegraaf* dedicated a small corner of a page to this occurrence indicated that Romania's position in the world had eroded the effects of its sports diplomacy.<sup>195</sup>

From an external perspective, such attempts were compromised even further due to the unfolding geopolitical situation. The Cold War was warming which drastically reduced the utility of engaging with a rebellious Warsaw Pact state like Romania, especially since it got increasingly more radical in its domestic policies. As Odd Arne Westad argued, the bipolar system of the Cold War was based on conformity, which allowed mavericks, like Romania, to function in roles way above their paygrade.<sup>196</sup> When Mikhail Gorbachev became the new leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, it marked the dawn an era of reforms and the gradual geopolitical warming. Glasnost and perestroika also contrasted starkly with the totalitarian

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<sup>189</sup> NRC Handelsblad, 'Asiel. Een Roemeense Journalist'; NRC Handelsblad, 'Journalist Uit Roemenië Wil in VS Blijven'; New York Times, 'Rumanian Journalist Defects'; Los Angeles Times, 'U.S. Quickly Approves Romanian's Request for Asylum'.

<sup>190</sup> New York Times, 'Rumanian Vanishing Act Is Explained'; New York Times, 'Rumanian Incident'; 'Zestien Supporters van Steaua Vragen in Sevilla Asiel'; Los Angeles Times, 'Romanian Defector's Family to Join Him'; Los Angeles Times, 'Romanian Reportedly Defects After Olympics'.

<sup>191</sup> New York Times, 'Thorns in the Roses'; New York Times, 'One Year After Olympics, Golden Memories Linger'; Los Angeles Times, 'Page 38', 193; New York Times, 'Comrade Tyrant Mr. Ceaucescu'.

<sup>192</sup> New York Times, 'A Rumanian "Friendship Tour"'.

<sup>193</sup> Murray and Pigman, 'Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy', 1101.

<sup>194</sup> *De Telegraaf*, 'Roemenië Op Wereldtoernee'.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> Westad, 'The Balkans', 355.



nationalism that characterised the second half of the 1980s in Romania, which subsequently led to its gradual isolation.<sup>197</sup> On one hand, Romania's Warsaw-pact allies slowly became less authoritarianist, and on the other hand, Romania's utility to the West thus decreased due to the demise of bipolarity, leaving the geopolitical niche that the CPR aimed for obsolete.<sup>198</sup>

This was noticeable in the attention that Romania received from American and Dutch press during the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul. In part because there was no boycott, the internal and external factors that deteriorated Romania's international position meant that there was not much opportunity to exercise sports diplomacy impactfully. This was also visible in press coverage, which less frequently and less admiringly addressed Romania's performances. For instance, the NY Times focused mostly on how a Romanian gymnast was instructed, according to Romanian protocol, to answer the press after she had won four medals.<sup>199</sup> The LA Times, which along with its audience took the Romanians into their hearts four years ago, presumed that the Romanians would suffer from "glory sickness" because of their preceding World Championship victory.<sup>200</sup>

Nonetheless, Romania did not show many signs of deterioration at the 1988 Summer Olympics in their performances. Their achievements were significant, reaching an eighth place in the final medal standings, with a delegation (68) that was half the size of the one at the previous Olympics (124).<sup>201</sup> Considering that Seoul was not boycotted and thus hosted all the world's top athletes, Romania stood their ground. This was again mostly the case in gymnastics, as Daniela Silivas took over the baton from Ekatarina Szabo and continued the Romanian supremacy. With three individual golds and a silver in the individual all-round competition, it was clear that the Romanian soil was fruitful for the development of gymnastic talent. However, the foreign press expressed much less appreciation for Romanian performance in Seoul, as the coverage on this topic had also decimated in comparison to previous Olympics.

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<sup>197</sup> Gorun and Branescu, 'The Paradox of Nicolae Ceausescu's Foreign Policy and Several Reasons for the Deterioration of the International Image of His Regime'.

<sup>198</sup> Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 278.

<sup>199</sup> New York Times, 'Who's the Best?'

<sup>200</sup> Los Angeles Times, 'Soviet Vault To First; U.S. Takes Tumble'.

<sup>201</sup> IOC, 'Seoul 1988 Olympic Medal Table'.

## Conclusion

Given the antics of the Romanians during the 1980s, it is no surprise that the Romanian minister of Sports, Haralambie Alexa, smiled when he was asked about the separation of sports and politics. Over the course of the 1980s, the Ceaușescu regime used sports for diplomatic purposes on frequent occasions. After sports increasingly became a part of the domestic political agenda, the success of Nadia Comăneci in 1976 made the CPR aware of the utility of sport for foreign purposes as well. Moscow 1980 marked the beginning of Romanian sports diplomacy as a means to change its international image. That did not happen without any challenges, however. Before the Moscow Games, the increasingly anti-hegemonic policy direction of the Ceaușescu regime aimed to establish Romania as an independent actor within international politics. Amidst the boycott of Western states, American and Dutch press perceived Romania as a participant of an Eastern Bloc Party dominated by unsportsmanlike conduct, which thus contrasted with the image Romania desired of itself. Under the chieftaincy of Comăneci, the Romanians would still mitigate that impact. Thanks to the mythical reputation preceding her, the foreign press expressed a lot of sympathy and were in awe of her performances. In doing so, she promoted Romanian excellence by means of her virtuosity, which was very much welcomed by the increasingly nationalistic leader in Bucharest.

Los Angeles 1984 was impacted by a boycott as well, but this turned out to be a great opportunity for Romania. After skilfully navigating the months leading up to the Games, the Romanians eventually announced their presence and commitment to the Olympic values of international community and peace. In those announcements, Romanian officials did not hesitate to promote their country as an integral part of the Olympic tradition and also took the opportunity to contextualise any potential athletic success into their ideology. By attending the LA Games, the Romanians also reaffirmed their image as the independent maverick from Moscow, for which they were rewarded almost immediately with economic gains. In doing so, the Romanian regime, again with the help of Comăneci, put the spotlight on its athletes and paved the way for them to captivate foreign audiences even further. They successfully did so as they were applauded by both the international press and audiences in Los Angeles' stadiums. Athletes thereby bore the fruit from the CPR's investments sport, which aimed to transform sport a political tool at home and abroad.

However, after the glory of the LA Olympics, the Romania's international image worsened to an extent that sports diplomacy was rendered obsolete. Dutch and American newspapers picked up more and more frequently on acts of defection, as well as on the

deteriorating human rights situation. The austerity measures and the warming of the Cold War eclipsed any efforts in sports diplomacy by the Romanians. World tours of the Romanian gymnastics team were not covered in the same positive light by foreign press as before. This development was also noticeable during the Seoul Games in 1988, where, regardless of the decent performances, the Romanian team received significantly less attention.

Therefore, the performance of Romanian athletes at the Olympic Games in the 1980s did improve the Romanian image, at least in the first half of the decade. Not only was the perception of Romania positive in Western press, but they even managed to reap economic benefits from their sports diplomacy strategy, which was a conscious goal of the Ceaușescu regime. However, the Romanians would find their downfall in a typical pitfall of sports diplomacy: duality. Although the achievements of Romanians were heroic, the domestic situation in Romania and the sporadic defections it caused had always been a smudge on Romanian sports diplomacy. Eventually, the repression became so severe that the neo-Stalinist regime's credibility in sending benign messages of sports diplomacy abroad was ruined.<sup>202</sup>

As this is a typical problem with sports diplomacy, the Romanian case has demonstrated once again the trouble that authoritarian states have in shaping their image into a positive one.<sup>203</sup> Given the increased activity by harder states in soft power realms such as sports diplomacy, this work advocates for further research to be done on the effectivity of such strategies in improving the international images of authoritarian regimes.<sup>204</sup> In such research, this thesis also calls for awareness on IR being a predominantly Western discipline. Specifically, it is important to bear in mind that public diplomacy efforts by authoritarian states are less likely to transcend to democratic states and their people. Given that most IR scholars are from Western democratic states, this problem causes an inherent bias that can trouble the analysis of such efforts by authoritarian states. This work therefore encourages scholars to look at the impact of public diplomacy and soft power efforts by authoritarian states directed at other non-democratic states. Particularly, this could be interesting regarding soft power efforts by China on the African continent.

This brings us to the limitations of this research. Because of language barriers, this work was not able to incorporate any Romanian primary sources that could have offered great

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<sup>202</sup> Murray, 'The Two Halves of Sports-Diplomacy', 588.

<sup>203</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 122.

<sup>204</sup> Examples of existing work that address the use of sports diplomacy by authoritarian states: Brannagan and Giulianotti, 'Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment'; Chen, Colapinto, and Luo, 'The 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony'.

insights into the formulation of the sports diplomacy strategy of the CPR. For instance, such sources could have pointed out the key figures within Romanian leadership in the making of such policy. Additionally, they could have helped in uncovering how the CPR used athletes in the shaping of its international image. This work instead had to rely on secondary sources by Romanian scholars to gauge the regime's intent and strategy embedded in their policy making. Therefore, this thesis encourages more contributions on the historiographical theme of sports in Romania, but also advocates for expanding this to other, smaller Cold War states.

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## Appendix I



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If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

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Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

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- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
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- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
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