

Euro 2012 and the UK's 'Semi-boycott'

Written by Jonathan Grix

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JONATHAN GRIX, JUN 22 2012

For those who believe sport and politics do not mix, the last 30 years or so must have been a little disappointing. Not only has the political use of sport by states increased, but so has the variety of ways in which this takes place. East German sport policy, for example, became a key government strategy to try to leverage legitimacy for an artificially created state living in the shadow of its big, rich, capitalist neighbour. No wonder the poorer cousins poured scarce resources into creating a world-beating sports system (of which systematic doping was only the icing on the cake), the key characteristics of which can be seen in leading sports systems today.[i] Other political uses of sport included and include the showcasing of a city/state through staging a sports mega-event (FIFA World Cup, Olympics or 'second order' events[ii] such as the Commonwealth Games or the European Football Championships). This we could understand as part of a 'soft power' strategy intended to improve the host's image abroad and influence 'foreign publics' and their notions of the host nation.[iii] A third political use of sport has been through the expression of 'coercive diplomacy' via boycotts of certain events. It is to the latter I wish to turn for what follows.[iv]

Long employed as a tool to signal disagreement, disgust, dismay and distrust of a nation either staging a sports 'mega' or holding a tournament, the boycott of sports-related events has once more made the headlines in the Euro 2012 Football championships. The history of such boycotts leaves an unclear legacy of whether they were successful in achieving their original aims or bringing about the desired impact they were intended to. The best known Olympic boycotts in the midst of the Cold War were during the 1980 Games in Moscow and the 1984 Games in Los Angeles. Both represented the polar opposites of competing regimes. During this period in history athletes represented their state ideologies and Moscow and Los Angeles were the epi-centres of communism and capitalism respectively; the competition continued in the sports arena with a fierce contest and jostling for positions on the all-important medal table.[v] Interestingly, the US-led boycott of the Moscow Games prompted Mrs Thatcher to write to the GB Olympic athletes asking them to stay at home. They refused to follow the Government line; one in particular left for the USSR and came back with a gold and silver medal. It was, of course, the now Lord Coe, feted by the conservatives and once an aide to William Hague (at present the UK Foreign Secretary). Had Coe boycotted Moscow he probably would not have been made a Lord, most likely would not have led London's successful bid for London 2012 and the London Organising Committee of the Olympics and Paralympic Games (LOCOG). The US were protesting against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; the Soviets retaliated by leading an Eastern-bloc boycott of the 1984 Games, which, perhaps paradoxically, have gone down in sports history as the 'coca-cola Games' due to the very high involvement of corporate sponsors in its staging. Such political use and boycotting of sporting events has to be understood in the context of the time.

Other Olympic boycotts of note include the withdrawal of 22 African nations – 441 athletes – from the 1976 Montreal Olympics. The reason behind this protest was New Zealand's 1976 tour of Apartheid-ridden South Africa.[vi]

So, what should we make of the UK government's semi-boycott of the Euro 2012 championships? I say 'semi', because the government stated clearly that they would not send any ministers to the preliminary rounds at Euro 2012 in Ukraine amidst on-going concerns about Human Rights. While there is no doubt that such issues should be debated, the 'semi' status of the UK's boycott leaves it a little ambiguous as a political stance. A spokesman for the Government suggested that ministers would attend the semi-finals, were England to qualify, based on the fact that this stage of the competition takes place in the territory of the co-hosts, Poland;[vii] it is unclear whether the UK would send a representative to the final, held in the Ukraine. Quiet apart from the wishful thinking behind such sentiments,

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the UK need to decide whether to make a political stand by *boycotting* the championships in principle, not just those parts of it held on Ukrainian soil. Most of the concern revolves around legitimate worries about the treatment of the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, who is currently languishing in jail on charges many believe 'trumped up'. In addition, the recent Panorama exposé on racism among Ukrainian football fans started a fierce debate about whether England's multi-ethnic supporters should heed former England player, Sol Campbell's, warning and stay away from Ukraine.

When considering the effectiveness of the UK's stance, it is instructive to consider the media focus generated by a sports mega-event first, and by such actions second. The rationale for holding such an event like Euro 2012 is to showcase a city/nation, especially one that has ambitions to join the EU. The problem with this state strategy of using a sports 'mega' for furthering your national interests is that you have to be sure that you have your house in order, as the ferocity of the world's media gaze around such events is unprecedented – particularly in the case of football, by far the world's most popular sport. Witness the problems India had with the Delhi Commonwealth Games – intense media exposure brought to light corruption and a number of problems ranging from child labour to unfinished athletes accommodation. India's ambition to stage an Olympic Games – and announce itself on the world stage – has been seriously dented.[viii]

Despite the 'semi' nature of the UK's boycott, their doing so has intensified the media focus and scrutiny on Ukraine further, which may lead to enforced change on the ground in Ukraine. Perhaps the intense scrutiny brought to bear on the this EU-aspirant is no bad thing, if it leads to meaningful and open discussions about racism in society, prejudice on the grounds of sexuality and the rule of law?

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[i] Dennis, M. and Grix, J. (2012) *Sport Under Communism: Behind the East German "Miracle"*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

[ii] Black, D. (2008) 'Dreaming big: the pursuit of "second order" games as a strategic response to globalisation', *Sport in Society*, 11, 4, pp. 467-480.

[iii] Nye, J. S. (Jnr). (1990) 'Soft Power', *Foreign Policy*, 80, pp. 153-171; Grix, J. and Houlihan, B. (2012) 'Sports Mega-Events as Part of a Nation's Soft Power Strategy: The Cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012)', (unpublished manuscript).

[iv] Hill, C. cited in Levermore, R. and Budd, A. (eds.) (2004) *Sport and International Relations*, London, Routledge, p.3.

[v] For a discussion of the relevance of the Olympic medal table see: See Hilvoorde, I. V., Elling, A. and Stokvis, R., (2010) 'How to influence national pride? The Olympic medal index as a unifying narrative', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 45, 1, pp.87-102.

[vi] See the 1976 Olympic Review, published by the International Olympic Committee, <http://www.la84foundation.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicReview/1976/ore109/ore109h.pdf>, accessed on 22.06.12.

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[vii] See the BBC news report at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-18517477>, accessed on 22.06.12.

[viii] See <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/604196.aspx>, accessed on 22.06.12, for an assessment of India's chances of staging an Olympic Games prior to the Commonwealth Games.