

# **AGGIS: The Olympic and Paralympic Games Through the Lens of the State's and the Public Interest in Sport**

## **Worldwide relevance of the Games**

The 30th Summer Olympic Games and 14th Paralympics marked this year not only from the perspective of sport competition but also from broader social, cultural, economic and political perspectives<sup>(1)</sup>. It has once again been proven that sport represents far more than simply the concept of competitive games. This year's (Para)Olympics shows how broad the reach of sport is in terms of the social integration of people from all around the world, regardless of their age, gender, sexual, cultural, ethnic, religious or health status. An astonishing number of volunteers helped stage the Games, which are clearly also an important business opportunity. Both Games were widely covered by the media, and not only in the sports' sections of the media space. When the media campaign was at its peak, information about the Games represented some of the top news items in either 'classical' (meaning not only sport-related) daily reports or various types of other non-sport programmes, like economic, cultural broadcasts and especially advertising. Consequently, new items related to the non-competitive face of sport emerged in the context of these new journalistic attentions and genres, like the importance of practicing sport for the quality of life of all generations, of care for environmental protection, the role of sport in the recovery from the economic and financial crisis, urban planning profits from sports infrastructure etc.

Generally less well-covered but still very present are much more negative facts connected with especially the Olympic (and not so much the Paralympic) Games. As was the case in ancient times when the Olympics had the power to interrupt military clashes over the globe, this has not happened in the last few decades when economic, cultural and even ethnic hatred crossed even the minimal borders of dialogue between sides in conflict. Further, this year's Games were the first in history to be protected by the military which, due to a fear of terrorist attacks, included air defences erected on the roofs of buildings in London. Moreover, back in history the Games were often used as a mechanism for political boycotts (such as the 1972 Munich Games when 11 Israeli athletes were taken hostage by Palestinian 'Black September' terrorists to protest against the holding of 234 Palestinian prisoners in Israel, or the 1980 Moscow Games when US, West German, Japanese and 60 other Olympic Committees boycotted the Games due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), as a means of protesting (like at the 1968 Mexico City Games when, 10 days before the Olympics began, students protesting against the government were surrounded by the army who opened fire, killing 267 and injuring more than 1,000. At the same Games American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos were expelled for raising their fists in a 'black power' salute on the winners' podium), as a tool of the states' controlled doping programmes (for instance the cases of East German state projects, or the more recent Chinese cases)<sup>(2)</sup>. All of the above facts remind us of the darker, non-sports-like viewpoint on this most important sport event in the world. In connection with these, questions about the relationships between sport and government or state policies happen to be the most exposed

## **The role of the state – the leading issue of this discussion**

I regard this core question of the role of the state as the leading one for this discussion, however from a slightly different point of view as already exposed and illustrated in my domestic Slovenian case. The main interest here is to detect what kind of (Para)Olympic publics governments are in relation to their real, every-day, public open (non)interventionist approaches in or for sport in general, and what kind of impact their interventions bring and for whom. In a way the issues of the

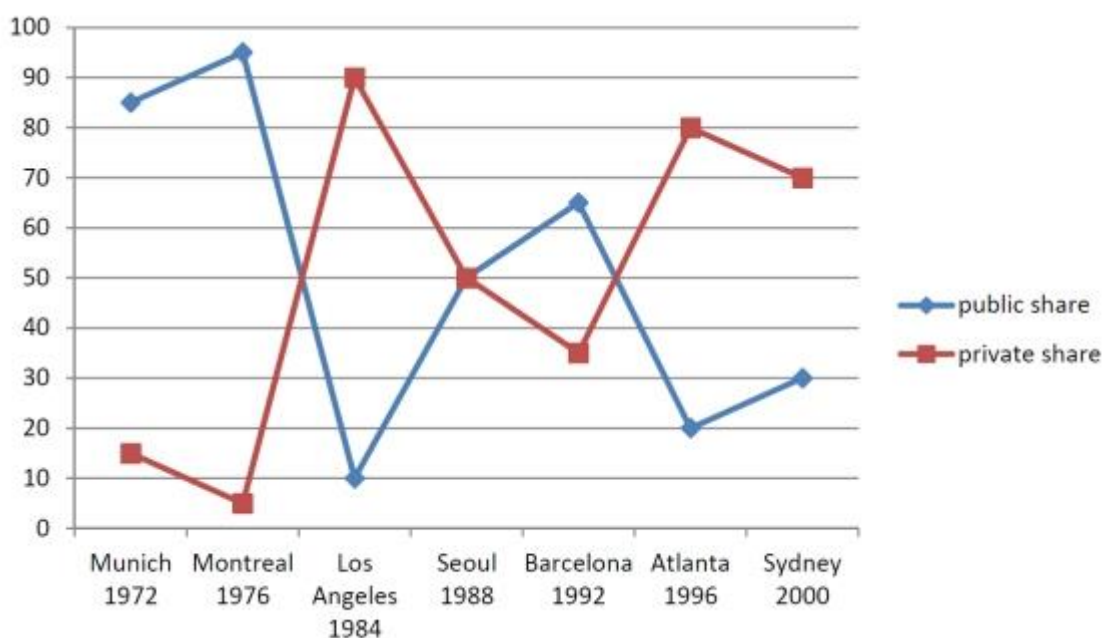
various faces of state intervention, as well as the selection and implementation of public interests and goods will be addressed by the thoughts set out below which are all founded on research project data (Kustec Lipicer, Slabe Erker and others 2012).

### The state: Why and how?

Firstly, on the assumption of speaking about a democratic regime let me indicate something about the myth that politics and thereby governments are not allowed to intervene in sport due to the assumption of destructivity.

An examination of historical facts shows that from the 19th century on, firstly especially liberal European governments and later also the majority of other governments together with the sport associations of those times started to recognise sport as an extremely important component of educational policy and for that reason began promoting the role of sport in the educational system via various government measures. Sport was identified as an important part of so-called 'leisure time' activities governments are supposed to promote by their measures, also with the aim of ensuring a satisfied citizen labelled with 'quality of life'. In recent times, very similar, core motives are attributed to the role of sport in relation to health. In addition, very outstanding motives of the state's intervention in sport with the aim of its own promotion relative to its internal and external 'publics' are also quite frequent. In the case of the Olympic Games, the latter might correspond to the fact that a more than 50% financial share for organising the Games has been guaranteed by the governments of the organising cities over the last three decades (with the exception of the US and Australian liberal systems), followed by the economic aspect that reflects the struggle of these same financiers with the danger of incurring huge net financial losses after the Games.

Graph 1: Public-private share for the Olympic Games



Source: Preuss 2002

## **Where does the Slovenian state stand?**

### **Understanding the public interest in sport**

The motives of the Slovenian state regarding the abovementioned contexts of the state's appearance in sport almost fit into the already indicated textbook images and motives of governmental intervention in sport, including support for organising major international sporting events, yet for now surely not (yet) in supporting the (Para) Olympics. In the framework of its fundamental laws, the state has specified that its measures will mainly support five types of sport activities relating to the so-called public interest in sport: a) sport for children and youth; b) recreational sport; c) quality sport; d) elite sport; and e) sport for the disabled.

### **State financial support for sport**

According to the available financial data, financial support for the public interest in sport has relative to the country's GDP represented about 0.4% of all public funds and around 2% of the total national budget.

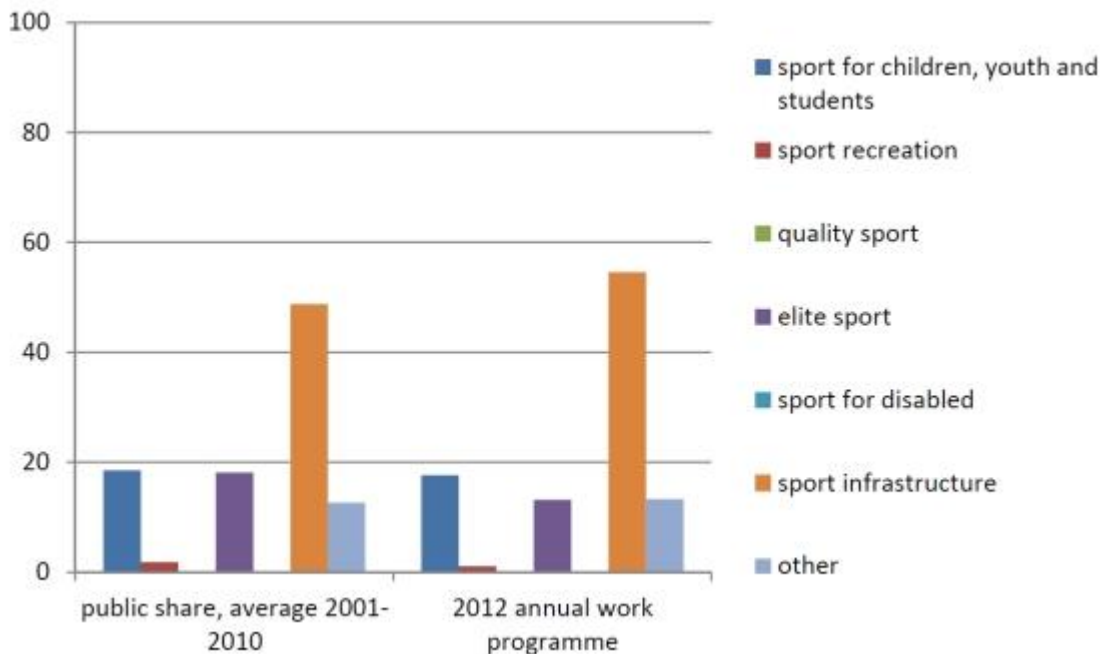
### **Elite sport**

Elite sport as the core type of sport activity that is directly devoted to realisation of the public interest (also including national (Para)Olympic athletes) receives an average share of 20% of the financial cake indicated above, mainly for co-financing athletes' preparatory trainings, performances and competitions, the payment of their health insurance and rewards for achieving top results. This amount excludes the financial share for the salaries of (only non-disabled) elite athletes who during their careers are employed by various ministries. Two striking aspects are apparent in this picture: 1) the unequal treatment of non-disabled and disabled elite athletes; and 2) the decreasing financial support in the 2012 (Para) Olympic year, when the annual amount of funds was 5% lower than the ten-year national average.

### **Non-elite sport**

Besides the mentioned 20%, the state also invests in elite sport indirectly, namely by encouraging other contents of sport public interest through various kinds of programmes, information and financial measures. The structure of such spending is as follows: in the last decade 18.5% of financial incentives have been dedicated to sport for children, youth and students, including the promotion of the education of young elite athletes, 1.8% of funds went towards sport recreation, 0% for the field of quality sport, and 0.2% for disabled sport. The rest, namely almost 60% of public funds not directly connected to defined contents of public interest, were allocated to 'sports infrastructure' (something less than 50% or even 5% more than abovementioned average in 2012), about 5% was allocated to support the functioning of sport clubs, their unions and associations (in recent times the state had on average dedicated around 70% of all financial resources to the sport associations' bodies and organisations, including the supreme sport authority the Olympic Committee of Slovenia, under whose auspices athletes are also attending the Olympic Games; again the national Paralympics umbrella organisation called Sports Federation for the Disabled of Slovenia – the Paralympic Committee of Slovenia is excluded from this financial support), approximately 5% of public funds was also reserved for the organisation of international sporting events, professional tasks in sport and other matters.

Table 1: Shares of public funding for sport in Slovenia 2001-2010 and 2012



Sources: Grujić and Jeraj 2011 and Annual Sports Programme in Slovenia for 2012

## Concluding remarks

### The (Para)Olympic perspective in general

First of all, the figures presented above raise many more new questions regarding the role of the Slovenian state in sport and at the (Para)Olympic Games than they provide answers to help explain its public-interest-oriented intervention in the field. It is quite understandable that in general the role of a democratic state's intervention in sport can easily be 'excused' in current times when sport is recognised for its multi-dimensional, wider public interest, societal and economic functions. In this regard, the (Para)Olympic Games serve not only as sphere of sports competition of a very small group of elite athletes, but as an important global event with, among others, high and positive socially related symbol messages. Therefore, the future incentives of the positive and fostering role of states are also understandable so long as they are based on democratic principles, especially equality.

### The Slovenian state perspective

In this regard, the Slovenian government still has a work to do. Although its support for elite sport and the Olympic Games has never been at stake and has always been very generous, this same cannot be said for the state's support for the Paralympic Games which is growing yet continues to exhibit discrimination relative to the elite sport of non-disabled athletes, nor for the socially wider understanding and promotion of sport in the state's everyday making. Except elite athletes, mostly all other social groups in the country can identify inequalities in state support for their interests not as stated on paper, but in everyday policy-making as primarily seen in the lack or even absence of the promised state financial support, be it for children, youth, students, recreational athletes or the

disabled as representatives of social minority groups. In contrast, the crucial question of the disproportionate role of sports infrastructure needs to be exposed. What position does sport infrastructure take in relation to the sport public interest, and from the perspective of the (Para) Olympics discussion in relation to state incentives for elite sport? Is sports infrastructure another area of public interest or simply the most wasteful policy measure in the field which does not transparently address its target groups? Under the guise of the public interest are we perhaps talking of the existence of a huge level of corruption, some form of money laundering through sport infrastructure? The data plainly point out that the answer is not simple, even unclear, because the real ‘holders’ or target sports groups for whom the infrastructure is built are generally not even known or defined.

Is all of the above a sufficient argument for or against government intervention in sport in Slovenia? Does everything stated above reflect a balanced concern for the public interest? Is this a sufficient reason that allows politicians to shake hands with (Para)Olympic athletes with a clear conscience? Are the facts presented above sufficient proof that in this current, politically heated period politics will look after athletes or perhaps vice versa? I would not dare suggest answers to these pertinent questions and will instead conclude this discussion by providing some additional information about the financial rewards given to Slovenian (Para)Olympic medal holders which might ultimately be of help when deciding whether the Slovenian government with its existing support and in the current social and economic circumstances is encouraging the (Para)Olympics project or not, and whether elite sport should continue to seek or be ashamed of the support it receives from the state.

*Table 2: Financial rewards for Slovenian (Para)Olympic medal holders, (in euros)<sup>(3)</sup>*

Financer / medal	Gold	Silver	Bronze
The state <sup>3</sup> for Olympic and Paralympic athletes and trainers	An athlete in an individual sport discipline: 22,000 An athlete in a team sport discipline: 17,000 A trainer: 11,000	An athlete in an individual sport discipline: 15,000 An athlete in a team sport discipline: 11,000 A trainer: 7,000	An athlete in an individual sport discipline: 7,000 An athlete in a team sport discipline: 5,000 A trainer: 3,000
The Olympic Committee of Slovenia – for athletes	20,000	17,500	15,000

*Source: Rules on criteria for co-financing implementation of the annual sports programme at the national level*

### Sources used:

- Grujić, Saša and Jure Jeraj (2011): Šport v številkah. Pregled financiranja športa v Republiki Sloveniji. Ljubljana: Zavod za šport RS Planica.
- Preuss, Holger (2004): The Economics of Staging the Olympics. A Comparison of the Games 1972–2008. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Kustec Lipicer, Simona, Slabe Erker, Renata and others (2012): “Effective state support for the citizens’ sport activity”. Research project data. Ljubljana: Centre for Political Science Research, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana and the Institute for Economic Research. The research project has been underway since 1 October 2010 and will continue until 30 September 2012. It is co-financed by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport and by the Slovenian Research Agency. The author of this contribution is also the

head of this project.

The framework for this contribution can be found at <http://metinalista.si/>.

### **Endnotes:**

1. For more about both Games, see <http://www.olympic.org/london-2012-summer-olympics> and <http://www.london2012.com/paralympics/>.
2. For more on this, see the Olympic Games webpage at <http://www.topendsports.com/events/summer/boycotts.htm>.
3. The Paralympic Committee of Slovenia as the umbrella organisation for elite sport of the disabled has so far not been financially rewarding Paralympic medal holders.
4. In 2008, the state the first time rewarded medal holders from both Games, whereas before that only medal holders from the Olympic Games received rewards. For a comparison of the financial rewards given to 2012 Olympic (not necessarily also Paralympic) medal holders in some other states, see: <http://en.rian.ru/infographics/20120817/175279097.html>.