

The Instrumentalization of Sport in Authoritarian Regimes *

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Abstract

In authoritarian regimes, sport goes beyond its traditional role as recreation and becomes a strategic instrument of political power. It reinforces regime legitimacy, mobilizes mass consent, and reproduces ideological narratives through cultural, emotional, and symbolic channels. Although numerous case-specific studies have examined the political use of sport, a systematic and theory-based synthesis has been lacking. This study addresses that gap by conducting a qualitative meta-analysis of how sport functions as an ideological apparatus in authoritarian regimes, drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Following PRISMA 2009 guidelines, 173 peer-reviewed studies were initially identified, 23 were screened for eligibility, and 9 were selected for in-depth analysis. The final sample was determined according to three criteria: (1) explicit focus on the political instrumentalization of sport in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, (2) reliance on conceptual, theoretical, or comparative qualitative methods, and (3) publication in peer-reviewed academic journals. Each eligible study was independently reviewed by two authors to ensure relevance and methodological rigor. Qualitative content analysis and thematic coding were then applied to extract dominant political functions of sport. Three recurring strategies were identified: (1) constructing leader cults by associating athletic success with regime power, (2) organizing mega-events as ideological spectacles to foster national unity, and (3) employing sports media to disseminate propaganda and control discourse. Historical and contemporary case studies—including Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, China, and Russia—demonstrate strikingly consistent patterns. The study concludes that sport in authoritarian regimes operates as a hegemonic mechanism embedded in state structures, facilitating both domestic consent production and international legitimation through symbolic practices and cultural rituals.

Keywords: *Authoritarian Regimes, Hegemonic Structures, Ideological State, Sport and Politics.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sport has historically manifested itself not merely as an expression of physical competition but also as a socio-political phenomenon, deeply shaped by interaction with societal structures. In the development of modern nation-states, the consolidation of collective identities, and the shaping of international relations, sport has functioned both as a tool of propaganda and as an element of soft power (Grix, 2013; Cynarski & Skowron, 2014). Especially in authoritarian regimes, the multidimensional functionality of sport is strategically utilized to produce political legitimacy, direct societal mobilization, and reproduce ideological domination (Giulianotti, 2015).

The political use of sport in such regimes extends beyond domestic concerns and is increasingly visible in the domain of foreign policy. Through sport, regimes construct symbolic representations of national unity, reinforce leadership cults, and restructure their international image. Mega sporting events, in this context, are not merely athletic spectacles but also carefully orchestrated political projects (Boykoff, 2016; Tomlinson & Young, 2006). These projects often serve to create an illusion of openness and modernity while masking authoritarian practices, particularly under the guise of international engagement and prestige (Chadwick & Widdop, 2023; Manzenreiter, 2010).

However, the political instrumentalization of sport—its forms, patterns, and theoretical underpinnings—remains insufficiently systematized in the literature. Studies often focus on isolated cases, lacking comparative and conceptual coherence. In response to this gap, the present study aims to systematically examine how sport is functionalized as a hegemonic tool in authoritarian regimes by conducting a meta-analytical evaluation of existing academic work. Key themes such as propaganda, legitimacy production, leadership cult construction, ideological reproduction, and soft power strategies are analyzed through a synthesis of qualitative and theoretical studies (Grix & Lee, 2013; Cornelissen, 2010).

This research adopts a multidimensional perspective that moves beyond superficial correlations between sport and politics. It incorporates frameworks from political theory, cultural studies, and international relations, with specific reference to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which views hegemony as a system of leadership by consent—where ruling classes maintain control not only through coercive means but by cultivating voluntary agreement through cultural and ideological influence (Gramsci, 1971). Likewise, Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) offers a crucial lens, identifying institutions such as media, education, religion, and notably sport as mechanisms that reproduce dominant ideology without resorting to overt force (Althusser, 1971). Accordingly, this study offers a comprehensive framework to understand sport not simply as a recreational or cultural activity, but as a layered hegemonic mechanism embedded in authoritarian political structures.

2. THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Authoritarian regimes are types of governance in which political power is exercised by a limited group, often outside the bounds of legal and institutional oversight mechanisms (Loxton, 2024). In such regimes, legitimacy is maintained through non-electoral means; opposition is suppressed, civil society is restricted, and public opinion is shaped through the monopolization of the media. According to Linz (2000), authoritarian regimes are political systems where political pluralism is severely constrained, yet, unlike totalitarian regimes, ideological homogenization is not mandatory. Linz further emphasizes that the essential characteristics of these systems include the cultivation of a leadership cult, limited but meaningful political participation, and the instrumentalization of formal institutions (Linz, 2000; Art, 2012).

Following Linz's classic distinction, totalitarian regimes display an encompassing ideology and extensive mobilization, whereas authoritarian regimes severely restrict pluralism without necessarily enforcing total ideological homogenization (Linz, 2000). In this meta-analysis, we include Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR as boundary cases at the hard end of the authoritarian spectrum—not to reclassify them, but to illuminate common mechanisms of sport instrumentalization across regime types. Our aim is pattern identification (how sport functions as propaganda, legitimacy production, and leader cult), rather than typological adjudication per se (Geddes, 1999; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Authoritarian regimes are defined as systems where power is maintained by a centralized authority and political competition is substantially restricted (Geddes, 1999). In these regimes, power is consolidated not only through the manipulation of elections or coercive measures but also through the management of public perception and control over cultural production (Schedler, 2002). According to Schedler, authoritarian regimes not only suppress political opposition but also seek to guide citizens' alternative identities, affiliations, and quests for meaning.

Diamond (2002) categorizes modern authoritarian regimes as "hybrid regimes," arguing that these systems can simultaneously exhibit both democratic and authoritarian characteristics. Within this framework, mass-appeal domains such as sport become strategic tools for reinforcing regime legitimacy and strengthening the sense of national unity. Sport, particularly through national achievements, serves as a practical example of how regime loyalty is fostered (Brady, 2009).

Moreover, Giliomee and Simkins (1999) emphasize that in authoritarian regimes, the manipulation of cultural domains—such as sport, art, and media—is achieved not only through coercion but also through the production and redefinition of popular culture.

Levitsky and Way (2010) offer a more contemporary perspective on authoritarian regimes through the concept of "competitive authoritarianism". According to them, certain regimes formally preserve democratic institutions yet systematically use these institutions to suppress opposition and maintain power. In this context, authoritarianism functions not only through overt repression but also

through democratic erosion facilitated by electoral engineering, media control, and legal mechanisms (Rensmann, 2024). Both approaches provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how sport, as a controlled cultural sphere, can be utilized within authoritarian regimes.

Mass Mobilization and Propaganda Mechanisms: In authoritarian regimes, the preservation of political power involves not only coercive measures but also various propaganda mechanisms that encourage voluntary participation (Hellmeier, 2021). This section elaborates on how sport, in particular, becomes central to these mechanisms, transforming ordinary competitions into orchestrated spectacles that reinforce regime narratives. In this context, sport plays a highly effective role in mobilizing the masses and in concealing legitimacy crises directed at the regime. Mass mobilization is shaped through large-scale events, sports ceremonies resembling rallies, and narratives of national achievement, while sports media also contributes to this process by disseminating ideological discourses (Koch, 2013).

The propaganda mechanisms of authoritarian regimes aim to achieve mass mobilization not only through state power but also by utilizing emotional unity and symbolic representation tools (Wedeen, 2015). In these regimes, sport becomes an instrument of ideological control; it functions not merely as entertainment or a marker of success, but as a means of producing "emotional loyalty." In this regard, sports competitions are combined with mass spectacles to transform into arenas of "ritualized loyalty" (Koch, 2010).

Brownell, focusing on the case of China, emphasizes that mega sporting events are designed not solely for international prestige but also to renew public trust in the government and divert attention from economic or political issues (Brownell, 2008). Similarly, Grix and Brannagan highlight the central role of sport in the construction of "soft power" and in reinforcing regime legitimacy through national narratives (Grix & Brannagan, 2016).

Authoritarian leaders, by developing grand narratives such as "achieving victory together" or "national pride" through sport, produce positive images in the collective memory of the masses. This process supports a hegemonic order in which social legitimacy is reinforced not through direct political debate but through sporting successes. Particularly, mega sporting events are designed as high-visibility, symbolically charged organizations that mobilize broad segments of the population, turning the sports arena into an ideological showcase (Abanazir, 2023).

National Identity Constructed by the State: Authoritarian regimes aim to construct national identity through top-down, state-driven cultural policies. In this regard, sport serves as a highly visible medium through which nationalist discourses are staged, collective memory is mobilized, and regime legitimacy is reinforced. In this context, sport provides a symbolic arena where nationalist discourses are reinforced, the past is glorified, and national unity is dramatized. State-sponsored athletes reflect the images of "success" and "strength" associated with the regime they represent, while clubs, federations, and sporting events are transformed into stages for enacting national unity (Lewis, 2018).

In this process, sport ceases to be merely a field where physical performance is displayed; it becomes a site for delineating and reproducing the ideological boundaries of the regime. This strategy is employed both to pacify internal opposition and to project an image of a strong and stable state to the outside world. Thus, sport emerges as both a symbolic and functional tool in the identity politics of authoritarian regimes (Allison, 1993).

2.1. The Political Functions of Sport

Antonio Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony: Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is based on the idea that political power is sustained not only through coercion but also through consent. According to Gramsci, dominant classes secure the consent of various segments of society by presenting their own values and interests as if they were universal, primarily through ideological apparatuses (Gramsci, 1971). This process operates particularly within cultural domains, notably through institutions that appear "neutral", such as education, media, and sport (Rowe, 2004).

When evaluated within the framework of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, sport emerges as a domain that facilitates the permeation of the dominant ideology throughout society. Authoritarian regimes shape collective identities through sport and generate consent for their political structures by promoting concepts such as "national unity" and "pride." Thus, sport becomes not merely a field of physical performance but also a medium of ideological orientation (Hargreaves, 1986).

Althusser and the Approach of Ideological Apparatuses: Louis Althusser explains the role of ideology in social reproduction by conceptualizing the state through two primary components: the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses (Simsek, 2021). Sports institutions, especially schools, clubs, federations, and media organizations, function as ideological apparatuses that help reproduce and disseminate dominant narratives within authoritarian regimes (Althusser, 1971).

In authoritarian regimes, sport, through these ideological apparatuses defined by Althusser, plays a crucial role in the production of regime-loyal identities and compliant citizen profiles (Althusser, 2014). Youth sports programs, mandatory physical education policies, and media-driven sports discourses particularly serve to position individuals in a passive and obedient political stance (Talimciler, 2005). In this context, sport holds a non-coercive yet highly directive ideological function.

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy Literature (Joseph Nye): The concept of "soft power," developed by Nye, refers to a state's capacity to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. The essential components of soft power include culture, values, and the legitimacy of foreign policies (Nye, 2004). Sport is directly related to all three of these elements and plays a critical role, especially within authoritarian regimes, in reconstructing the image presented to the outside world (Zanella et al., 2024).

Hosting international sporting events serves as a prestige project directed at both domestic and international audiences for authoritarian regimes. Through such events, the regime conveys messages

of modernity and progress while aiming to reinforce its global legitimacy. Examples such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the 2022 Qatar World Cup illustrate how authoritarian structures have developed soft power strategies through sport (Rookwood, 2023).

2.1.1. Leader Cults and Hegemonic Strategies

Building on Gramsci's notion of cultural leadership and Althusser's ISAs, leader cults transform athletic achievement into ideological capital, linking bodily excellence to political virtue (Rowe, 2004; Márquez, 2018). Ritualized ceremonies, choreographed spectacles, and leader-centered broadcasts interpellate citizens as loyal subjects, converting affect into consent (Wedeen, 2015; Leese, 2016). In our cases, sport operates as a performative shortcut to legitimacy: victories are narrated as confirmations of the leader's foresight; defeats are externalized to hostile forces, protecting the regime's moral standing (Mondello, 2009; Singer & Lalich, 1995).

2.2. The Instrumentalization of Sport in Authoritarian Regimes

Authoritarian regimes seek to consolidate their political legitimacy not only through mechanisms of coercion and control but also by constructing hegemonic discourses via various cultural instruments. In this context, sport becomes a powerful political tool employed for both domestic and international audiences (De Melo & Malaia Santos, 2023). Regimes leverage the mass appeal of sport to support propaganda activities, contribute to the glorification of leadership figures, and reproduce political consent through narratives controlled via media monopolies (De Waele & Trif, 2020).

The Use of Sport as a Propaganda Tool: In authoritarian regimes, the use of sport for propaganda purposes serves a strategic function in the process of instilling regime values among the broader population. Regimes transform the domain of sport into a platform for the circulation of ideological messages, redefining concepts such as unity, solidarity, loyalty, and sacrifice through sporting achievements. Such practices are frequently employed to legitimize political repression and to present leadership as charismatic figures (Shaw & Youngblood, 2017).

In this context, practices such as presenting international successes as "national victories," having athletes make statements demonstrating their loyalty to the regime, and attributing national teams' successes to political leadership illustrate how sport is functionalized as a propaganda tool (Petracovschi, 2021).

Leader Cults, Mass Spectacles, and Narratives of Success: One of the characteristics of authoritarian regimes, the cultivation of a leader cult, is symbolically reinforced through sport (Márquez, 2018). Athletes' achievements are presented as a direct result of the leader's vision, and national team victories are attributed to the foresight and will of the leader. This narrative serves to elevate the leader as the "symbolic embodiment of national unity" (Singer & Lalich, 1995).

Mass sporting spectacles—particularly opening ceremonies, stadium events, and celebratory organizations—are used both to ensure domestic mobilization and to visually manifest the regime’s power. In such events, reflecting the regime’s aesthetic and ideological vision, the physical congregation of the populace symbolically reinforces their bond with the regime (Leese, 2016).

The Monopolization and Manipulation of Sports Media: Media is one of the fundamental ideological apparatuses that reinforces and amplifies the political functions of sport. In authoritarian regimes, media is often directly or indirectly controlled by the state, and sports broadcasting is structured in alignment with this direction. Sports media not only reports match results or athletic successes but also serves as a tool for producing and circulating pro-regime discourses (Edelman & Holden, 2021).

Examples such as manipulating athletes' statements, promoting narratives focused solely on "success" and attributing failures to external factors (such as referees, the international system, or hostile foreign powers) demonstrate how media constructs a narrative favorable to the regime. Thus, sports media simultaneously ensures ideological reproduction while preventing alternative narratives from gaining visibility in the public sphere (Mondello, 2009).

2.3. Comparative Case Studies

Examining how sport has been utilized as a political tool through three historical and contemporary examples of authoritarian regimes is crucial for revealing its functions in ideological propaganda, leadership construction, international legitimacy, and societal mobilization processes (Darnell et al., 2019). While national teams often serve as symbols of unity, club teams tend to represent regional or local identities, producing distinct socio-political dynamics. This distinction has led authoritarian regimes to adopt differentiated strategies in managing sport at the national versus the club level.

Nazi Germany and the 1936 Berlin Olympics: Nazi Germany provides a classical example of how sport can be instrumentalized for ideological propaganda and international image management. The 1936 Berlin Olympics were extensively used by the regime under Adolf Hitler to showcase Germany’s "rebirth" and to propagate the myth of Aryan racial superiority (Large, 2007).

The regime transformed the Olympic organization into a “political spectacle” infused with nationalist aesthetics, designing every detail—from stadium architecture to media broadcasts—to reflect Nazi ideology. The successful organization of the Games not only enhanced the regime’s prestige domestically but also strengthened the international perception of Nazi Germany as a modern, powerful, and orderly state (Mackenzie, 2003).

The Soviet Union and the State-Controlled Sports System: The Soviet Union regarded sport not only as an ideological propaganda tool but also as a structural component of its system. The state-controlled sports system was designed both to demonstrate the superiority of socialist ideology and to

discipline society. Shaped by the principle of amateurism, this system advocated that sport could be based on more “moral” and “collectivist” foundations compared to the capitalist system (Riordan, 1980).

Success in international sports competitions was presented as proof of the socialist regime’s “superiority,” and athletes were symbolized as “representatives of the people.” Sports schools, clubs, and federations were operated under direct party control, and athlete development processes were conducted through centralized planning. Thus, sport became not merely mass entertainment but also a battleground for ideological struggle (Parks, 2016).

Post-2000 Russia: Sport and Power Display in the Putin Era: Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has drawn from past Soviet experiences in the political instrumentalization of sport, while simultaneously enhancing this process with modern communication technologies and global media opportunities. The Putin administration uses sport as a means to strengthen national unity domestically and to bolster Russia’s global prestige internationally (Grix & Kramareva, 2015).

Mega-events such as the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup served strategic functions in constructing Russia’s modern image, consolidating its regional leadership, and laying the cultural groundwork for proposing an “alternative order” against the West. In this process, athletes, the media, and cultural representations were incorporated into narratives that legitimized Putin’s charismatic leadership (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2014).

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study was conducted using a qualitative meta-analysis method to explore how sport functions as a political instrument within authoritarian regimes. Meta-analysis is an analytical research technique aimed at synthesizing existing scholarly findings to reveal dominant trends, thematic patterns, and methodological approaches in a given academic field (Cooper, 2010).

3.1. Research Design and Scope

The research is based on the meta-analytical examination of academic studies that investigate the political instrumentalization of sport in authoritarian regimes—specifically focusing on functions such as propaganda, legitimacy-building, leadership cult construction, and national identity formation. Only secondary academic sources were used.

3.2. Data Sources and Search Strategy

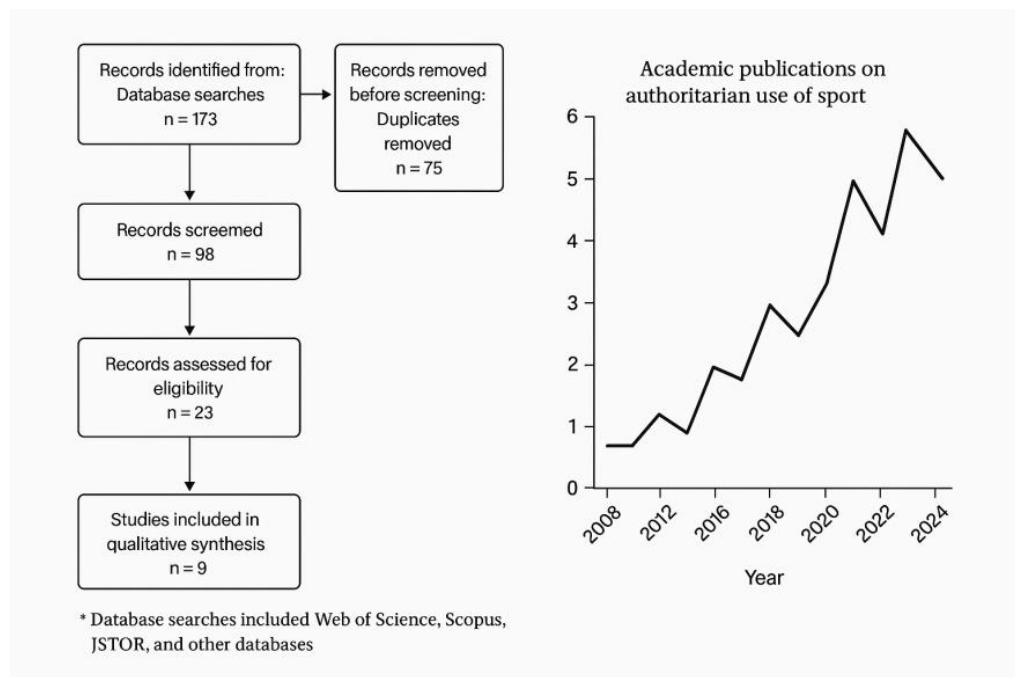
The literature was collected through systematic searches conducted between January 2000 and April 2025 across multiple academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, SpringerLink, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar. Boolean operators were applied to combine search terms such as “authoritarian regimes,” “sport and politics,” “sports propaganda,” and “sportswashing.” The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English or Turkish. This process initially yielded 173 records. No specific date limitation was imposed beyond the

availability of database content. Although the primary database searches focused on publications from January 2000 to April 2025, seminal theoretical works published prior to this period (e.g., Holt 1998) were included in the final sample due to their critical relevance and citation frequency in the analyzed literature. Studies were included if they addressed the political use of sport in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, employed conceptual, theoretical, or qualitative-comparative methods, and were published in reputable academic journals. Conversely, studies were excluded if they focused solely on physical education or health outcomes, were non-academic in nature (opinion pieces or media articles), or lacked a clearly defined political or regime-oriented analytical framework.

3.3. Study Selection Process

A total of 173 peer-reviewed studies were initially identified. After removing 75 duplicates, 98 studies were screened for relevance, 23 met the inclusion criteria, and finally 9 were selected for in-depth analysis. The selection process followed the PRISMA 2009 statement (Moher et al., 2009) and is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2009 flow diagram and publication trend of selected studies on the political instrumentalization of sport in authoritarian regimes



Source: Adapted from Moher et al. (2009) and created by the authors based on extracted data

3.4. Data Analysis

The included studies were subjected to qualitative content analysis using open coding and thematic categorization (Timulak, 2009). Primary codes were derived inductively and grouped into higher-order themes (leader cults, propaganda, identity formation, soft power strategies). Coding was performed independently by two authors, and thematic coherence was validated through intercoder comparison. NVivo 14 software was used to assist in data organization.

Table 1. Characteristics of the 9 Included Studies on the Political Instrumentalization of Sport in Authoritarian Regimes

Author(s), Year	Country/Context	Method/Approach	Main Finding	Regime Type
Holt (1998)	Germany, Italy, USSR	Historical comparative	Sport legitimized ruling elites; linked athletic success to ideology	Authoritarian
Bairner (2001)	Northern Ireland	Case study, qualitative	Sport reshaped national/sectarian identities	Hybrid/Divided
Tomlinson and Young (2006)	Olympics & World Cup (global)	Theoretical/cultural analysis	Sport mega-events shape national identity and legitimacy	Mixed
Manzenreiter (2010)	China (2008 Olympics)	Case study, media analysis	Olympics used for modernization and soft power	Authoritarian
Grix (2013)	Various regimes	Comparative, political analysis	Olympics as ideological spectacles	Authoritarian
Grix and Lee, (2013)	Emerging states	Conceptual, political theory	Mega-events as soft power strategies	Hybrid/Authoritarian
Boykoff (2016)	Various Olympic hosts	Historical, political analysis	Olympics as arenas of ideological showcase	Mixed
Murray (2012)	Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia	Diplomacy/statecraft analysis	Sport used as diplomatic tool to soften foreign policy	Authoritarian/Hybrid
Chatziefstathiou and Henry (2012)	Olympic movement (cross-regime)	Comparative discourse analysis	Olympics legitimized regimes, represented ideology	Mixed

The characteristics of the nine included studies, with details on year, country/context, methodological approach, main findings, and regime type, are summarized in Table 1.

3.5. Case Selection Rationale

Our inclusion strategy was not designed as a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). Rather, we meta-synthesized peer-reviewed studies that explicitly examined the political instrumentalization of sport in authoritarian or hybrid regimes and met our methodological criteria (Sections 3.2–3.3). While influential cases such as Franco’s Spain or Ceaușescu’s Romania feature prominently in the broader literature, the specific peer-reviewed conceptual/qualitative works that matched our criteria and time window did not yield eligible items for the final sample. We explicitly acknowledge this as a scope decision of the meta-analysis rather than a substantive exclusion.

3.6. Limitations and Scope

As a qualitative meta-analysis, this study synthesizes secondary, peer-reviewed scholarship rather than analyzing primary sources (e.g., leader speeches, period newspapers, propaganda brochures). This design choice increases breadth and comparability across contexts but limits direct archival

engagement. We make this trade-off explicit and encourage future work to triangulate our synthesized patterns with primary discourse analyses.

Moreover, the decision to employ a qualitative meta-analysis rather than direct discourse analysis of authoritarian leaders or athletes was intentional. While primary discourse analyses can yield valuable insights into individual cases, they often remain limited in scope and context. By synthesizing peer-reviewed secondary studies across diverse regimes, our meta-analytical approach enables broader conceptual generalization and the identification of recurring mechanisms. This method thus provides a comparative framework that reveals cross-case patterns of sport instrumentalization, which would be difficult to capture through single-case discourse studies alone.

4. RESULTS

The synthesized evidence presented in Table 2 illustrates a coherent pattern: authoritarian regimes construct institutionalized frameworks in which sport is embedded as a central ideological and hegemonic mechanism. From leader glorification to the orchestration of transnational legitimacy, sport is neither politically neutral nor culturally passive. Rather, it is systematically deployed to produce consent, manage dissent, and stabilize regime narratives—functioning far beyond the domains of entertainment or physical performance. This meta-synthesis does not claim causal inference; instead, it highlights recurring mechanisms—propaganda, legitimacy production, leader cult construction, and identity formation—observed across heterogeneous contexts.

One of the clearest patterns concerns the use of sport to construct and reinforce personality cults around authoritarian leaders. Holt (1998), demonstrates how, during the interwar period, regimes in Germany, Italy, and the USSR appropriated athletic success to symbolize the strength and legitimacy of ruling elites. Athletes were framed as extensions of the leader’s ideological will, linking physical excellence to political supremacy. This process exemplifies Gramsci’s notion of cultural leadership, whereby regimes cultivate consent through symbolic means.

Mega sporting events also play a central role in projecting political power and consolidating internal cohesion. Grix (2013) and Boykoff (2016) emphasize that these events function as “ideological spectacles”—ritualized performances designed to evoke national unity, emotional allegiance, and symbolic superiority. In Althusserian terms, such spectacles can be interpreted as material practices through which the ideological apparatus of sport reproduces regime values in aesthetic and embodied forms.

Soft power strategies constitute another prominent theme in the analyzed literature. Grix and Lee (2013) and Manzenreiter (2010) reveal how authoritarian regimes use international sporting events as platforms for image management and diplomatic normalization, particularly in the face of global criticism. These events become symbolic capital that reconfigures international perceptions, aligning

with Althusser's conceptualization of ideology as shaping the subject's imaginary relation to real conditions.

Cultural diplomacy and nation branding are further explored by Tomlinson & Young (2006), who show that sport plays a foundational role in constructing collective identity narratives. Murray (2012), expands this perspective by examining how regimes in the Gulf region use sport to mediate foreign policy and project an image of modernity and openness. Such practices highlight how sport functions beyond domestic ideological reproduction and enters the realm of global hegemonic negotiation.

A distinct yet related pattern involves the use of sport in conflict regulation and identity reconstruction. Bairner (2001) provides an illustrative case from Northern Ireland, showing how sport was instrumentalized to reshape sectarian identities and promote controlled forms of cohesion. This reveals sport's capacity to serve as both a symbolic boundary and a unifying platform within politically fragmented societies.

Table 2. Comparative Overview of Political Uses of Sport in Authoritarian Regimes

Author/year	Country/focus	Key findings
Holt (1998)	Germany, Italy, USSR (interwar period)	Sport used as tool for regime legitimacy, mass mobilization, and soft power diplomacy.
Grix and Lee (2013)	Emerging states	Mega-events used as soft power strategies.
Manzenreiter (2010)	China (2008 Beijing Olympics)	Olympics used for image management and modernization strategy.
Grix (2013)	Various authoritarian regimes	Olympic Games function as ideological spectacles.
Boykoff (2016)	Various Olympic hosts	Olympics throughout history functioning as ideological showcase arenas.
Tomlinson and Young (2006)	Olympics and World Cup	Global events shape national identity; link between culture and politics.
Murray (2012)	Gulf countries (Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia)	Sport used as diplomatic tool to soften foreign policy image.
Chatziefstathiou and Henry, (2012)	Cross-regime comparison	Olympics used for regime legitimacy and ideological representation.
Bairner (2001)	Northern Ireland	Sport used to reshape national and sectarian identities and manage conflict.

As summarized in Table 2, the reviewed studies converge on a set of mechanisms through which sport is instrumentalized in authoritarian settings. Despite variations in country context and methodological approach, the findings consistently demonstrate that sport is mobilized for leader legitimation, ideological spectacle, soft power diplomacy, and identity management. This cross-case coherence underscores the robustness of the patterns identified in our synthesis and highlights the

broader applicability of Gramscian and Althusserian perspectives to the study of sport and politics in non-democratic regimes.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this meta-analysis demonstrate that in authoritarian regimes, sport functions not as a neutral or apolitical domain but as a structured ideological apparatus strategically mobilized to serve regime interests. This aligns with Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, in which political dominance is maintained not solely through coercion but through the active consent of the governed, cultivated via cultural and institutional mechanisms embedded in civil society (Gramsci, 1971). In this context, sport operates as a cultural practice that engenders emotional identification with the regime, normalizing the status quo and reinforcing state legitimacy through symbolic means.

In addition to these insights, Gramsci's concept of the "historic bloc" is also relevant for understanding the political role of sport. The historic bloc refers to the alignment of economic, political, and cultural elements into a cohesive structure that sustains hegemony. Within authoritarian regimes, sport becomes an integral component of this bloc, functioning as a cultural practice that fuses symbolic representation, popular enthusiasm, and political authority. In this way, sport contributes not only to ideological reproduction but also to the consolidation of broader socio-political coalitions that stabilize authoritarian rule.

Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) offers a complementary lens, as it emphasizes how non-repressive institutions such as sport, media, and education serve to reproduce dominant ideology without the explicit use of force (Althusser, 1971). Sport, in this framework, operates as a ritualized and aestheticized medium through which individuals are interpellated—hailed into ideological subject positions that align with authoritarian narratives. The performative nature of sport, including national anthems, flag ceremonies, and leader-centered broadcasts, constitutes an embodied form of ideological address.

Evidence from the reviewed literature suggests that mega sporting events are intentionally designed to generate passive and affective consent by invoking national pride, collective memory, and symbolic victory. Giulianotti (2015) characterizes these spectacles as "ideological theatres," wherein the audience becomes a participant in the production of regime legitimacy. Events such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup function as large-scale political rituals that stage state power under the guise of global celebration (Boykoff, 2016; Tomlinson & Young, 2006).

Gramsci's notion of the "national-popular" is particularly relevant here. Authoritarian regimes utilize sport to construct a shared sense of national destiny and unity, effectively dissolving the boundary between state and civil society (Rowe, 2004). Through this mechanism, popular enthusiasm is redirected into ideological alignment with the ruling elite, facilitating what Gramsci termed "spontaneous consent." Schwenkel (2013) notes how cultural and historical memory—mobilized through sporting

commemorations and historical analogies—reinforces continuity between past national glory and current leadership.

While sport often serves as a symbolic arena for fostering national unity in authoritarian regimes, it can also generate social divisions and tensions. Long-standing rivalries, particularly among club teams, may produce hostility rather than cohesion. In this regard, national teams are typically framed as symbols of unity, whereas club teams embody regional or local identities, producing distinct socio-political dynamics. Consequently, authoritarian regimes pursue different strategies in managing these two levels of sport. Examples such as intense football derbies illustrate this dual dynamic, showing that sport may simultaneously reinforce solidarity on one level while exacerbating fragmentation on another.

Individual sports are often more easily symbolized around leadership cults, as the achievements of a single athlete can be directly associated with the authority of the regime. By contrast, team sports emphasize collective effort and unity, projecting narratives of cohesion that transcend individual figures. For this reason, authoritarian regimes tend to develop differentiated hegemonic strategies depending on the type of sport, exploiting individual victories for leader glorification while mobilizing team successes to reinforce collective national identity (Grix & Brannagan, 2024; Scharpf et al., 2022).

At the same time, sport does not always serve the interests of authoritarian regimes. Certain clubs, such as St. Pauli in Germany or Livorno in Italy, have historically functioned as spaces for counter-hegemonic identities and oppositional cultures. These examples demonstrate that sport can also provide a platform for resistance, enabling alternative political expressions that challenge dominant ideological narratives.

The concept of soft power was originally developed within the discipline of international relations, where it primarily refers to strategies aimed at influencing external audiences. However, our findings indicate that authoritarian regimes employ sport as a dual instrument of soft power, simultaneously targeting international image-building campaigns and the production of domestic legitimacy within their own societies. On the international stage, sport functions as a mechanism of soft power, legitimizing authoritarian governments despite widespread criticism of their domestic policies and human rights records. This practice, often termed “sportswashing,” reflects the use of symbolic capital to project an image of progressiveness and legitimacy (Grix & Lee, 2013; Chadwick & Widdop, 2023). Viewed through Althusser’s framework, this international projection illustrates how ISAs can operate across borders through global media, diplomacy, and international sport federations to sustain ideological dominance.

Sport also serves as a tool for ideological control in ethnically or religiously divided societies. Bairner (2001) illustrates how sporting practices can be instrumentalized to reframe national identity narratives, suppress dissent, and align fragmented groups with the regime’s political vision. Here, sport

becomes a site of hegemonic negotiation, where the struggle for ideological control is enacted and reproduced through affect, symbolism, and representation.

Finally, the convergence of digital technologies and sports communication enhances the ideological reach of the regime. As Hutchins and Rowe (2012) argue, authoritarian systems exploit digital media to stimulate affective attachment to state-sanctioned narratives while marginalizing oppositional discourse. This dynamic reaffirms both Gramsci's insights into the manufacturing of consent and Althusser's recognition of how ideology operates through everyday institutions.

In sum, the discussion affirms that sport functions in authoritarian regimes not as an isolated cultural domain but as an integrated ideological mechanism. It sustains political authority by cultivating consent, structuring affect, and reinforcing hegemonic norms through both domestic spectacle and international representation. Future research should further investigate the intersection of sport, ideology, and authoritarianism using interdisciplinary lenses that engage critically with both political theory and cultural practice.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how sport is positioned and functionalized as a political instrument in authoritarian regimes through a meta-analytical synthesis of existing academic literature. The findings indicate that sport extends far beyond the domains of physical competition or cultural entertainment. Instead, it operates as a deeply embedded hegemonic mechanism that sustains political legitimacy, shapes ideological discourse, reinforces leadership cults, and reconstructs national identity.

The meta-analysis identifies three interrelated strategies through which authoritarian regimes instrumentalize sport: (1) the production of legitimacy via symbolic association with power and order, (2) the construction of collective identity through emotionally charged mega-events and nationalist rituals, and (3) the management of international image via soft power diplomacy and sport-centered global engagement. These strategies are exemplified through the use of sports media as an ideological platform, the portrayal of athletes as loyal embodiments of regime values, and the transformation of sporting spectacles into tools of mass mobilization.

Anchored in Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), the study demonstrates that sport in authoritarian regimes functions as an apparatus through which consent is actively manufactured alongside coercion. Sport thereby assumes the role of a ritualized cultural practice that fosters internalized ideological alignment with ruling elites - normalizing their dominance without the overt use of repression.

Historical and contemporary cases-such as Nazi Germany, Stalinist USSR, Putin's Russia, and the Olympic projects of China and Qatar-illustrate the enduring relevance of sport as a vehicle for political myth-making, image management, and symbolic governance. These examples underscore how

regimes strategically deploy sport to conceal authoritarian practices behind narratives of modernity, development, and global cooperation.

In conclusion, this study affirms that sport is not a politically neutral domain but rather a structured field of ideological production and hegemonic negotiation. Its use in authoritarian contexts reveals the sophistication with which regimes co-opt cultural practices to stabilize power relations and shape public consciousness. Consequently, future research must adopt interdisciplinary approaches - drawing from political theory, cultural sociology, media studies, and international relations - to further decode the complex entanglements between sport and authoritarian governance in both historical and contemporary settings.

Ethics committee approval for the study was obtained from the Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee on May 7, 2025, with document number GO 2025/1497.

The authors declare that the study was conducted in accordance with research and publication ethics.

The authors confirm that no part of the study was generated, either wholly or in part, using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools.

The authors declare that there are no financial conflicts of interest involving any institution, organization, or individual associated with this article. Additionally, there are no conflicts of interest among the authors.

The authors declare that their respective contributions to the research process are as follows: the first author contributed 60%, and the second author contributed 40%.

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