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**Sports, Popular Geopolitics and Technology:
The Case of Simona Halep**

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of sports, popular geopolitics, and technology using the case of Simona Halep as a sporting hero annexed to geopolitical discourse. Drawing on the scientific literature context of popular geopolitics and the logic of Murphy, we argue that nation-states try to impose a dominant geopolitical stance through sports imagery. We also examine how Simona Halep's successes on the tennis court have been used to promote a positive Romanian self-imagery, and how Romanian foreign policy has utilised the image of Simona Halep to achieve improved country branding internationally. The "3mm" documentary on Halep is discussed as a technological challenge presented to this national imagery. We argue that the documentary, which was meant to create engagement between the sporting hero and the wider public, was also used to create an emotional grip with the national symbol Simona Halep and, thus, to create an affective bond with the viewers. The decision to air the documentary on December 1st, the national day of Romania, was crucial in creating a sense of national pride, but failed to enhance the visibility of Romanian (sports) cultural products in an international setting. We demonstrate that sports have immense geopolitical power, and that mediatic technologies such as documentaries can be used to create engagement and to enhance national identity. The study's findings hold implications for future understandings of popular geopolitics and technology, and for policy makers seeking to leverage sports and other cultural products for nation branding and soft power.

Keywords: sports geopolitics, sports diplomacy, tennis, country branding, popular geopolitics.

JEL Classification: F50, M31, Z20, Z28.

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1. Conceptual Clarifications

Popular geopolitics provide cultural representations of states, nations, territories, or spaces through the use of pop culture or everyday meanings (Yatsyk, 2018). To create such representations, popular geopolitics pay close attention to entertainment television, internet, radio and other mass-communication channels in order to facilitate engagement between the mediatic subjects, objects, or practices and the public (Woodyer, Carter, 2020). By using such mediatic tools, popular geopolitics expands beyond statist geography, ideologically enlarging the imagined borders of the state through imagined social spaces and belongings (Rajkovic, 2022): while the physical borders remain unchanged, the imagined frontiers gain positive imagery from geopolitical contributions.

Using the logic of Murphy (1998), we argue that nation states use sports to remap the globe in their own right (Brazilian football, British lawn tennis, Hungarian waterpolo, Chinese table tennis, etc.), while trying to impose a dominant geopolitical stance through such sports imagery. In doing so, sports have the power to exceed physical boundaries and to create what Rajkovic (2022) calls “performative geography”: a shift from understanding geographical borders from a mere territorial and cartographical approach to a dynamic and imaginative approach based on sports achievements at the international level. As Guo (2022) argues, popular geopolitics inspire geopolitical imaginations that reach beyond usual geographical boundaries, or, as Sage (2008) points out, there are representations which are manifested through culture (or, in our case, sports) and not through topology. Sports have always been a powerful tool for states to remap the world in a performative manner and to promote their geopolitical interests in the globalised world through soft power features (Cho, 2015; Deos, 2014; Jiang, 2013). Nations can use such performative reshaping to expand their (soft) power and to create new geopolitical imaginations, which reach beyond physical borders and which can establish better diplomatic relationships internationally (Grix et al., 2015). Through sports, countries can showcase their core national identity and expand their influence globally (Chiang, Chen, 2021; Houlihan, 1997; Lemus-Delgado, 2021). Additionally, sporting investments can promote a country’s image abroad and serve broader strategic interests. Political leaders and visionaries use sports to build influence and soft power. Sports businesses and leagues seek to expand into new markets. Individuals, from athletes to team owners, pursue personal gains from the prestige, fame, and wealth associated with international sports (Koch, 2020).

Tennis, as any other global sport that reunites shared interests across borders (Roşca, 2010), has a geopolitical power through which it can facilitate diplomatic relationships between states. It intersects the realms of culture, social status, politics, and international relations. Players, officials, and fans from all over the world are brought together to share a common passion for the ‘white sport’. This serves as a common ground to promote the international development of mutual respect and understanding, and also to bridge cultural and political differences. As such, it is an effective instrument of global diplomacy. Building on Granchev’s (2022) idea, we consider that tennis (and tennis players) can be put in the service of the state through

geopolitical use. By employing popular, tennis-based geopolitics, states have the opportunity to extract positive results from image transfer, define a core identity, enhance rapport to citizens, and claim sovereignty in an international context in which other affirmation endeavors or tools failed to provide expected benefits. Tennis stars, given their international recognition and fame, often serve as a source of positive publicity and can be used to strengthen diplomatic ties (Bardocz-Bencsik et al., 2021; Vanc, 2014).

Inshakova (2022) revealed that popular geopolitics is a key in defining modern geopolitical economies and the prosperity of societies, next to traditional building blocks such as the political system. The serial narrative of the identitarian and sovereign state, traditionally created through political actions or dedicated country-branding campaigns, is taken over in popular geopolitics by fan-based constructions (representations). The framework used by a country to tell its unique story is constructed by sporting heroes and fans' representations of them.

2. Popular Geopolitics – Simona Halep

Sporting heroes such as Simona Halep can be exceptionally productive for projecting nationalistic imagery and for the geopolitical discourse with which Romania addresses the world, especially since Halep's major successes occurred during a decade in which Romania's traditional sporting performers (gymnastics, handball, football, etc.) failed to convince internationally. Romanian athletes have continued to perform well in some sports, such as table tennis, rowing, and fencing. However, these sports have not achieved the same level of notoriety as more popular sports such as tennis, especially after 2010. First, the media coverage (and mediatic appeal) of such sports was minimal, often being overshadowed by more popular sports like football, handball, tennis, or basketball. Odd enough, despite athletes achieving remarkable success at international competitions, the low media attention in their home country meant that their successes were not as widely recognised and appreciated by the domestic public. As a result, their achievements were probably not celebrated as much as they should have been on a national level, or at least, not as much as Halep's successes in tennis. Without extensive media attention, remarkable performances in table tennis or rowing often went unrecognised due to the lack of publicity and missed the chance to gain widespread recognition and inspire individuals to participate. Second, Romania's prominence in the international sports scene has waned in recent years, as other countries have taken the spotlight in sports in which Romania historically achieved notable performances, such as gymnastics, athletics, or handball.

Halep thus emerged as an opportunity to construct an identity for her native country. Romania already issued the message that it can produce international champions in the aforementioned other sports, but because of the lack of mediatic appeal, such sports could not create the platform for diplomatic communications that Halep was able to produce for her country. Through this platform, Halep became a source of official pride and national hope (Burnar, 2023), outlining Romania's place

on the world map, in terms of Murphy's (1998) and Rajkovic's (2022) remapping of the globe in one's own right through performative geography.

Simona Halep is probably Romania's main success story in sports of the 2010s. Like other athletes who reached heroic status, her narrative structure as informal geopolitical ambassador for Romania is associated with collective prestige (see Swierczewski, 1978) and is constructed of a mix of plot and success stories: between 2013 and 2020, she won 22 WTA tournaments and two Grand Slams (Roland Garros, 2018 and Wimbledon, 2019). Apart from being an athlete, Simona Halep became a medium through which a national rhetoric of success could be narrated globally: a scenario that Romania did not enjoy very much lately (in sports, in particular, but also at the overall level). The success of sports heroes is generally being used to create positive associations with their home countries. Through their on-court achievements, tennis stars also become symbols of international diplomacy, being able to send messages of goodwill around the world. Not only this, but Simona Halep is part of the WTA circuit, meaning she has a permanent international exposure, which enables her native country to showcase national identity on a global stage. Her national hero reputation and informal geopolitical ambassador status became apparent not only during her years of sporting success, but even in the aftermath of her doping suspension and during her long-protracted judgment, when the PM of Romania took the exceptional step of defending her as innocent (GSP, 2023).

However, as it usually happens in popular geopolitics, athletes do not typically engage in diplomatic efforts intentionally. While Halep is most certainly aware of her geopolitical role and that her actions can have a profound impact on popular geopolitics, she (and most other athletes) focuses on her sport and simply competes as part of her athletic journey. But, because international sporting events such as WTA tournaments provide a platform for diplomatic exchange and dialogue beyond the actual sporting competition, public diplomacy joins the game. These events serve as an opportunity (in most of the cases friendly and respectful) for diplomacy and exchange that can help foster better international relations, and states are ready to use them. Halep's athletic efforts and successes unintentionally promoted popular diplomacy through international competition. Her athletic prowess helped elevate Romania's public profile on the world stage, creating a better understanding of her native country internationally.

Simona Halep's storyline was well suited for a popular geopolitical annexation not only due to her performances on the court at that moment, but also because she epitomises an imagery that most Romanians can culturally relate to (or, by any means, aspire to): a young, well-mannered family-oriented girl who focuses on her tennis rather than on other social or commercial concerns that might be met with other high-performing athletes. Halep, thus, encapsulates a positive Romanian self-imagery which the public discourse could then use to achieve improved country branding at international scale. Moreover, this strong focus on the tennis game meant that Halep did not engage with major geopolitical themes (i.e. migration, political crises, inflation, etc.), so she would be easy to be instrumentalised for a given national rhetoric. Also, Halep enjoys a positive audience reception. That Halep is the

Romanian tennis player with the most WTA trophies and the most grand slams is a fact.

We can argue that a popular geopolitic constructed around the (fair) image of Simona Halep as a new Romanian sporting hero and role model (with an emphasis on “new”, yet somehow universal Romanian archetype) has been exported by Romania in its foreign policy demeanours (Burnar, 2020, 2021). Using the imagery of Simona Halep was yet another attempt that Romania made to improve the country’s foreign policy after the fall of the Communist Regime in December 1989, all the more so as Romania's sporting performances at the international level tended to decrease over time since the December Revolution. This can be explained by the fact that socialist planning was also reflected in a typical socialist sports training, the effects of which were still witnessed in the years after the revolution (the performances of the national football team and Olympic sports until the mid-2000s, when youth trained before 1990 reached the peaks of their careers), but as time passed, the effects vanished. Against such a backdrop of declining sports performances, Simona Halep has emerged as a ray of hope for Romanian sports. Haut et al. (2019) point out that successful athletes who are treated as heroes and receive accolades in their home country may not be recognised on an international level. Simona Halep is an exception to this rule. She has earned a great level of respect both in her homeland and across the world, although her stardom is clearly more powerful in Romania (Burnar, 2022). Her achievements on the court, including the two Grand Slam titles, have made her an inspiring and admired figure, beloved and respected across the world. She has become a role model for many aspiring athletes, and internationally represents Romania with distinction. Since the WTA circuit has a global following, using Simona Halep as a representation of a constructed identity about Romanian success transcended the geographical borders of her native country.

3. The “3mm” TV Documentary – A Technological Challenge to the Discourse of Romanian National Pride

Earlier, it was emphasised that private actors, as well as national states, engage in sporting investments, often doubling it with nationalist imagery amid geopolitical affairs in pursuit of diverse interests. This tendency was also observed on December 1st, 2020, when the private television channel, ProTV, one of Romania's top commercial broadcasters, aired the documentary film "3mm" about WTA tennis player Simona Halep. There was an additional layer, seeing that the documentary was funded by one of Halep’s main commercial sponsors, Banca Transilvania / BT, which branded it as “motivational documentary for all Romanians”. The bank had previously engaged with both Halep and nationalistic discourse, through an advertising campaign in 2018-2019 that portrayed Halep in glowing terms, as a national symbol (Burnar, 2023). As the respective campaign also ran in countries such as Spain or Italy, home to a prominent Romanian diaspora, it meant that BT had made a conscious choice to use the glories of Halep as a

springboard for its commercial interests, while trying, at least at face value, to improve the image of Romania abroad.

In Romania, Simona Halep is one of the most successful examples of popular geopolitics in recent years. Through her successes on the court, Halep transferred international prestige to the country, in a context in which Romania does not necessarily enjoy a positive image on the international stage. As observed by Kobierecki and Strożek (2017), good performances on the court shape the brand of a nation. This in turn piqued the major interest of shareholders from both the public and private sectors, who wished to capitalise on Halep's image as a national treasure.

As a mediatic event, "3mm" carried significant cultural value as it was the first documentary on Halep, who was 29 years old, and ranked second on the WTA circuit during its premiere (Roşca, Burnar, 2023). It aimed, according to the producers, to emphasise that Halep's achievements were not a coincidence but a product of her determination and hard work.

In addition to the significance of the documentary's main figure Halep, the socio-cultural context appeared (via multiple factors) to enhance the media impact of "3mm." December 1st is celebrated as Romania's National Day. In the context of airing a show about a national hero on a National Day, it could foster patriotic sentiments. Additionally, this was also the 25th anniversary of ProTV, further increasing the cultural significance surrounding the documentary's arrival.

It is noteworthy that, in spite of the patriotic promotional value and nationalistic imagery of the "3mm" documentary, the television ratings for the program were rather poor considering the numerous factors involved, including features such as national day, the holiday of audiences, COVID-19 movement restrictions, and a sports documentary showcasing a well-established popular hero.

From the perspective of 'popular geopolitics', it can be said that the '3mm' documentary was intended to create an engagement with the everyday between the sports hero and the general public. Meanwhile, the TV station also wanted to create an emotional connection between viewers and the national symbol Simona Halep by broadcasting the documentary film. Tapping on the potential of this affective bond, the decision to air the documentary on December 1st, the national day of Romania, was a powerful way to promote national pride and recognition of a successful athlete, hoping to achieve an effective image transfer from the athlete to the nation, demonstrating the positive impact that one person can have on millions.

4. Conclusions

Traditional geopolitics have been widely studied, with their vast implications for modern economies, societies, and political systems being largely acknowledged. This is not the case for popular geopolitics, a less discussed approach to geopolitics based on the contributions of popular culture to the serial narratives of states. In this paper, we used tennis as a case study to highlight that popular geopolitics can be a key for the better understanding of our globalised world.

Our analysis of the "3mm" documentary about Romanian tennis player Simona Halep highlights the significant role of popular geopolitics in creating cultural representations of states, nations, territories, or spaces.

The TV documentary aimed to create a strong emotional connection between the national symbol Simona Halep and the Romanian public by airing it on Romania's National Day. While it can be assumed that it elicited a sense of national pride, notwithstanding the bad TV ratings, the documentary failed to enhance the visibility of Romanian cultural products at the international level, indicating that such mediatic technologies face challenges in reaching global audiences.

Our findings underscore the immense geopolitical power of sports and how they can be leveraged to promote nation branding and soft power through the use of popular cultural representations. We argue that this documentary presented a technological challenge to national imagery, as it aimed to create engagement and enhance national identity by tapping into mass-communication channels (TV and the Internet) and everyday meanings.

This analysis can influence future understandings of popular geopolitics and technology, and of policymakers seeking to harness the power of sports and other cultural products for geopolitical ends.

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