

The European Sports Conference (1973-2005)

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ABSTRACT

Forgotten today, the European Sports Conference (ESC), which was founded in 1973, was a rare example of European cooperation in sports that went beyond the conflict between the East and the West. Unlike other organizations such as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) or the European National Olympic Committees (ENOC), the ESC was unusual in that it did not limit its activity to a particular sport, or to high-level sport. It was a forum of communication for promoting "sport for all," and also addressed concrete and crosscutting problems such as the doping of athletes or violence among spectators. Despite tangible tensions, in many respects it functioned as a space of Europeanization for and through sport.



The "Sport weekend" cartoon, published in the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on October 13-14, 1979, regarding the fourth ESC held in Berchtesgaden. Drawing: Gabor Benedel.

Major international sporting competitions were one of the areas in which the cultural Cold War played out after the Second World War. Yet in the wings—in the locker room so to speak—constructive exchange continued to take place over the Iron Curtain between sports leaders. These managers generally shared the notion that sport could and should be a factor for peace, by bringing together societies separated by politics. They also observed that they shared a certain number of challenges, such as the democratization of sport or the fight against doping, for which cooperation was useful and even necessary. In Europe, the primary governing body in which these exchanges were developed was the European Sports Conference (ESC).

It had its origins in the NGO-Club, a Western European association of sport federations founded in the 1960s. The organization's activities benefited from the general context of geopolitical détente that occurred in the early 1970s in the context of the Helsinki Accords, leading to the conference's creation in Vienna in 1973. The conference stood the test of time, surviving the various episodes in which the Cold War heated up, for example the Euromissile crisis, the Soviet-Afghan War, and notably during the boycotts of the Olympic Games in the 1980s. Without deviating from its trajectory, every two years the ESC brought together the leaders of European sport's directors of sport associations from Western European countries and senior civil servants in charge of sport for Eastern Europe—totaling approximately one hundred delegates for the thirty participating countries involved, although not all of them were invested with the same level of intensity. The two Germans, the Netherlands, Sweden, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia sent larger and more active delegations than France, Great Britain, and Italy.

The ESC's first congresses during the 1970s (Vienna 1973, Dresden 1975, Copenhagen 1977, Berchtesgaden 1979) took place within an official context without truly leaving room for informal meetings, thereby reflecting genuine suspicion. The primary subjects of discord recreated the political divide that was supposed to be transcended, beginning with the institutional status of the conference itself. In the West, there was suspicion of those in the East who wanted to "politicize" the organization by putting it under the authority of states, and there was opposition to linking it with the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which was proposed by a number of socialist countries in Dresden in 1975, or linking it with UNESCO, which was proposed by the Soviet Union. The state's role in matters of sport generally represented a recurring point of tension. Socialist delegations attributed a central role to the state apparatus, while other Western delegations supported the promotion of non-governmental associations, expressing the contemporary criticism of totalitarianism as well as the discourse on the "apolitical" character of sport. The criticisms made on this subject by representatives from the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and Norway were almost obsessive. Yet this did not prevent the signing—outside of the context of the conference—of multiple bilateral sport conventions between Western and Eastern countries. It was even one of the organization's most striking results from this period.

Beyond this dynamic between disagreements and conventions, exchanges occurred over the long-term, which were invisible but had a real impact. A space of communication was formed, in which participants identified problems and priorities for shared action. While the promotion of sport for all was the primary rallying point, less positive aspects such as doping, violence, and the commercialization of sport were also put on the agenda. These different problems and solutions were explicitly described as "European" by the actors, who felt powerless behind their respective borders, and therefore called for cooperation.

For all that, some actions remained rhetorical—a characteristic that was broadly criticized in the European press, notably in West Germany, where there were expectations of more concrete results, especially in relations with East Germany. During the fourth conference in Berchtesgaden in 1979, Willi Weyer (1917-1987), the president of the German Sports Federation (Deutscher Sportbund), tried to transform the ESC into a more operational organization. His efforts were in vain, as a coalition of Western and Eastern European delegations scuttled the initiative. The ESC would remain an organization of dialogue, and could function only on the basis of the smallest common denominator.

That same year nevertheless saw a turning point, with the creation of thematic "working groups." They met much more frequently and worked on concrete subjects (the construction of gymnasiums and sport fields, sport and youth, sport for women, sport for all, sport and doping, scientific cooperation), and became genuine platforms of exchange between European sport experts. The "sport for women" working group was the nucleus of a network of women campaigning for greater female representation in sport, which was highly active during the 1990s. The "sport and youth" group succeeded in organizing a youth camp during the Athens conference in 1987. At that point a working group began to develop a European Sports Charter, which saw the light of day in 1991.

However, the fall of the Soviet Union did away with the essential interest of the ESC. The Council of Europe and the European Union gradually imposed themselves as the dominant actors, leading to the disappearance of the conference in 2005.

The European Sport Conference was nevertheless an important space of Europeanization in sports within the specific context of the Cold War, through the networking and cooperation of a relatively restricted and lasting circle of actors. Of course the climate of debates, the format of its institutionalization, and the carrying out of projects were greatly marked by the divide between Eastern and Western Europe, although by exchanging opinions and jointly addressing problems, ambitions, and solutions, the participants created an unprecedented European space of communication and action in the field, one that indeed brought about rapprochement.

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