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THE WORLD CONVERGES AT MILANO

BLOOD POLITICS AND SPORT



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SPIRIT OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Editors Note By Lavinia Farina

The Olympic flame descended upon Milan-Cortina in February 2026, carrying the weight of the promise of a temporary ceasefire in the arena of global politics where athletes compete not as representatives of governments, but as embodiment of human potential. What unfolded was not a suspension of politics, but an intensification, revealing the complex nature of how it is impossible to separate sport from blood, and politics.

This edition of The Forum examines the 2026 Winter Olympics as a convergence point where failures of our era become impossible to ignore. When the International Olympic Committee (IOC) declared these as the “most gender-balanced Games in history”, the celebration collided with the deeper truth, that one of the original disciplines, nordic combined, in its 102 years of existence, still excludes women entirely. When Kazakhstan celebrated its figure skating champion the gold medal masked a system that undervalues dancers who brought home world championship titles, leaving non-olympic sports like ballroom dancing to survive on private grit alone. While American athletes carried their flag into the stadium, doing so while ICE agents walked the streets of Milan, met by



protesters that saw beyond the sports neutrality and in itself claimed it was a political position.

Members of The Forum travelled to Cortina to witness these tensions unfold firsthand, to move beyond the headlines into the arenas, to speak to spectators and athletes. Getting a feel of the weight of a game that interrogates what unity costs and whom it excludes. What emerges is the unmasking of politics in sport.

The articles presented investigate the convergence of blood, politics and sport through the distinct lenses: the economics of athletic sacrifice, the persisting gender barriers despite headlines of equality, protests against American enforcement abroad, and the structural corruption that binds global governing bodies. The Winter Olympics are never just a game, they are the world condensed into two weeks of ice and ambition, offering no escape from our world, but a stage upon which the deepest contradictions perform.





ICE HEATS UP MILAN: AMERICANS AND ITALIANS ALIKE PROTEST THE US DELEGATION'S SECURITY STAFF by Anya Eichenlaub

While the world gathered in Milan-Cortina for three weeks of an attempt at international unity at the Winter Olympics, the Trump administration had other plans: utilizing US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as personal security staff for the US delegation present at the Olympic opening ceremony, including Vice-President J.D. Vance as well as Secretary of State Mark Rubio. Italians in Milan and Americans alike both responded to the news with fervent protests with a clear message: ICE is unwelcome both in and outside of America. Milan Mayor, Giuseppe Sala, took the side of the protestors in a public statement, saying, "It is clear they are not welcome in Milan, without a doubt."

Since Trump took office for the second time in January 2025, ICE has ramped up operations within the US. In Trump's first year back in over, ICE operations increased by 75%, resulting in approximately 73,000 people being held in ICE Custody as of January 2026 (American Immigration Council, 2026). 32 people died in ICE custody in 2025, among others, such as Renee Good and Alex Pretti, who have been killed by ICE in public, launching viral outrage over the lack of training, regulation, and consequences for ICE agents. ICE's recent operations in Minneapolis, Minnesota sparked a new wave of protests against the government organization, and have received international recognition and criticism.

Given that US Customs & Immigration Enforcement has no jurisdiction outside the United States and their territories, as well as the fact that high-ranking officials such as JD Vance and Mark Rubio are already provided security through the Secret Service, the question remains as to why the administration would send undertrained and unregulated agents to Milan as the Vice-President's personal security?

Despite the criticism that the Trump Administration, as well as the whole of the United States, has received in the past year, hundreds of Americans still went to Italy to cheer on Team USA's 232 athletes. Both athletes and spectators have expressed a common feeling and open criticism towards the Trump admin and current state of government. From school walkouts within the United States to freestyle skier Hunter Hess openly critiquing the current state of government in a press conference, stating, "Just because I'm wearing the flag doesn't mean I represent everything that's going on in the U.S", the critiques against the Trump administration have now come to Milan-Cortina.

For Americans who have come to cheer on Team USA, the feelings about sporting Old Glory around Italy are certainly mixed. "I almost feel embarrassed to tell people I'm here cheering on the US. Like, I definitely don't feel proud to be American when I'm here, but at the same time I hope people realize I'm just supporting



the athletes and not our government.”

Said a study-abroad student who requested to not be identified in an interview with The Forum.

For others, however, the current state of politics didn't seem to phase their pride for Team USA; “The Olympics are supposed to be about coming together no matter what else is going on in the world. Even if nobody likes our government right now, there's no doubt that America dominates the international competition every time we come here, and we aren't going to miss out on seeing that.” said an anonymous American spectator who was handing out beads, bracelets, and Team USA merch to anybody who would take it inside the stadium.

Regardless of any headline, the energy within Milan was infectious. For many Americans, traveling outside of America right now may feel intimidating at first, but upon interactions with Milan locals, Europeans, and people from around the world gathered to celebrate the joy of sport, most sense of geopolitical conflict fades away into the joy of humanity. During an interaction with law students from Italy, they expressed empathy and above all, curiosity regarding the present American political scene. For a nation that is still healing from the wounds of fascism, the Italians, above all, were the most sympathetic to the new reality the United States is facing. The protests in Milan regarding ICE further prove that the world is not anti-American, they are anti-fascist.

The vast majority of Americans in Milan have spoken; there is a clear line drawn between the athletes and the American government. For Team USA, being at the Olympics is the greatest show of the American dream: of coming up from nothing, hard work, dedication, and following your dreams wherever they may take you. For a team built of queer athletes, descendants of immigrants, and as Amber Glenn has described as “woke b*tches winning”, Team USA sure gives Americans something to root for .

About the Author

Anya Eichenlaub is a sophomore majoring in International Relations with a minor in Communications at the American University of Rome. She is a member of the International Relations & Global Politics Club and AUR Debate Society. When she's not writing for the Forum she can be found on a weekend adventure, taking a million pictures, and engaging with the political scene in her hometown of Norfolk, Virginia. Upon graduation from AUR she intends to pursue a career as a political journalist.



WHEN GOLD DOESN'T PAY: THE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF OLYMPIC AND NON-OLYMPIC ARTISTIC SPORTS by Alua Kargabayeva

After the victory of Kazakh figure skater Mikhail Shaidorov at the Winter Olympics in Milan, Kazakhstan has strived in the cheerful patriotic wave, welcoming the new champion. Misha's story to the Olympic gold was truly remarkable and it clearly proves to be something the nation needed. Shaidorov not only brought the gold medal home, but also provoked a sudden unity in a society that has been polarizing (politically and culturally) over the last years. While Misha is being overwhelmed with mass media and fans attention now, his unexpected success in Milano will not only stay as the greatest achievement in his career, but hopefully will grant him financial security and freedom for the rest of his life.

Although today Misha is sponsored by a private company and probably after getting an Olympic title will attract more ambassador contracts, only few years ago his dad had to sell his car to allow Shaidorov pursue his sport. It is also interesting to see how the country actively celebrates talents only after their international achievements, but rarely supports them during their rise to success.

Kazakhstan was active in supporting Olympic champions, but in the moments of real challenge (financial, mental, physical) the government lacked apparatus that could support national athletes. Most of the sports successes in countries like Kazakhstan are individual,

which means that unlike the United States or Russia these athletes are not raised by a strong sporting system within the country, yet they achieve high level through a combination of unique individual talent, international coaching and private investments.

The individual talent rule is present in many sports and the situation is even more complex in non Olympic artistic sports, like ballroom dancing. Despite the costliness of dancesport, non-olympicism makes the level of events (unless there is more private investment and sponsors) and support for dancers much lower. For his historical gold in figure skating, Shaidorov was offered a car and a luxurious apartment in the capital, Astana. Whereas, in 2022 Maxim Zhilenkov & Arina Molochinkova, who were the first couple in Kazakhstan's history to win the Youth 10 dance World Championship in Latvia, were congratulated with less than 500 USD per couple, which is worth 0.67% of professional dancers' usual spending.

However, my goal is not to compare these two sports, but to draw attention to their economics and point out the systemic inefficiency of raising talents in artistic sports in our country. Corruption of government prevents the strengthening of structures and institutions that can enable sustainable development of sports. The choice of which sport to sponsor is never neutral, but political, as well as cultural.



The gender gap in competitive ballroom dancing is still present and can lead to lower development. There are simply more females than males, which prevents many from finding a partner. In Kazakh mentality most parents would still prefer giving boys to boxing and martial arts, rather than dancing as it is labelled “not masculine”. Indeed the country is considered an international leader in these sports. The allocation of a country's resources and being a boxing empire is a choice that follows with investments, prestige and support for athletes, therefore it is not impossible to become one in artistic sports too.

However, on a world level things are also complex. World Dancesport Federation (WDSF) recognised by the International Olympic Committee is an international body that governs official dance events, has made a significant effort to institutionalize ballroom dancing. However, it is not the only major structure in the field. There is a World Dance Council (WDC) that is as important and popular as WDSF, yet is not officially recognized by the IOC. The federations that previously were one, divided the dancing community, taking completely different directions. One moved towards making the sport Olympic, the other one tried to preserve the existing tradition and knowledge. The lack of unity in the ballroom dancing community and federations makes it much harder to promote development of the sport itself. Because both federations, despite all attempts to maximize the

scale of events, simply cannot do it larger than if they would unite their efforts.

Finally, there is hope that Shaidorov's Olympic gold could actually become a further step for the creation of a greater figure skating system in Kazakhstan, that would carry his and deceased Denis Ten's legacy. At the same time, there is a hope that there will be more economic transparency and support to the dancesport national team. Strong systems in artistic sports are needed and they are important, not only to resolve the financial issues and allow more athletes to participate. But also because systems can be able to protect athletes and further fight other structural issues like gender based violence, sexual harassment and violence against the children in sports. Unless the systems are established we will continue to have individual sparks of sport success and our national athletes will move abroad, seeking development. The country must reinvest in its economy and artistic sports can become a significant part of it.

About the Author

Alua Kargabayeva is an undergraduate majoring in International Relations with a minor in Economics at the American University. She maintains her role as a full time student while pursuing a professional career in dancesport. Alua is a 2024 World Vice-Champion in the Under 21 category. See her profile at www.theaurforum.com to view her 14 remaining national and international titles.



GENDER “EQUALITY” IN THE NORDIC GAMES by Maria Eduarda Orlandini

In 1924 in the resort Chamonix, France, where the Winter Olympics were born, the event was initially known as “Winter Sports Week of the VIII Olympiad” because the nordic Games had already existed. Around 258 athletes from 16 countries competed in 16 events, including bobsleigh, cross-country skiing, curling, figure skating, ice hockey, military patrol, ski jumping, speed skating, and *nordic combined*. This marked the birth of what is now known as the Winter Olympics. Fast forward 102 years: in 2026 Milan, Cortina will host around 2,800 athletes competing in more than 100 events.

The IOC (International Olympic Committee), called the 2026 Olympics a “landmark for gender equality”, with approximately 47% of the athletes in these Olympic Games being women, an increase of 1.6% since Beijing 2022. However, there will not be a single woman competing for a medal in one of the most traditional and respected disciplines, *nordic combined*. This can be understood through the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Equality of opportunity means that men and women are given the same formal access to compete. Equality of outcome refers to the actual results and representation that follow. In this case, although the IOC suggests that the playing field is now equal, equal access does not erase the historical disadvantages women have

faced. Women and men may start the same race today, but they do not come from the same background or history of support. Decades of exclusion continue to shape present outcomes. In this article, we examine how, despite the IOC’s claims of gender equality, women remain restricted from certain competitions. While 47% of athletes are women—an example of representation that suggests equality of outcome—their limited participation in specific events shows that true equality has not yet been achieved.

Unlike in the Summer Olympics, women were allowed to participate in the Winter Olympics from the start. At first, it was only figure skating, but as the world changed the rules changed too, and there have definitely been improvements in regards to the inclusivity of women; however, they are still not allowed to compete in one of the “original” events — *nordic combined*.

Nordic combined is a modality where athletes compete across both ski jumping and cross-country skiing. It's one of the most difficult winter sports because it requires precision only the most dedicated athletes are able to achieve. And still, at the most equal Winter Olympic Games ever, one tradition continues, no *nordic combined* for women. And it's not because there are no female athletes in this sport, there are many, competing all over the world in various competitions, including the





World Cup, World Juniors Championships, and both individual and team competitions. The reason is that the Olympic Committee still needs to work on their inclusivity. Winning a medal in the Olympic Games is every athlete's ultimate goal, it is the golden opportunity to compete with the best of the best, representing your country in the world's biggest stage, and yet, women are denied this opportunity.

This whole situation came to light because of two American siblings, both athletes competing in winter sports. One sibling, Niklas Malacinisk, is ranked 39th in the world, while his sister Annika Malaciniski is the second highest ranked American in the list. While Nicklas struggled to qualify as his last season wasn't that great, Anikka would have qualified with ease, but the olympic dream is not within reach for her. Both of them are in team USA, both of them compete at the national and international level, both of them have recognition within the sport and yet, only one will compete in these Olympic Games. In fact, this discipline has been declining in recent years, with fewer men participating, which the IOC has used as an excuse to potentially exclude the discipline from future Winter Games. The athletes tried to appeal before the Olympics, but the IOC denied the appeal, saying they will reconsider after Milan. However, allowing women to compete would completely solve this problem as it would bring more people and competition to this modality, but despite

the effort from athletes, the dream has not yet been achieved.

There is no denying that the Milan 2026 Winter Olympics are a significant step towards gender equality in sports, but the fact that women are still unable to compete in one discipline shows that there is room for improvement. *Nordic combined* is one of the most prestigious and traditional disciplines in winter sports, which has been around for 102 years and it still excludes women. Although the Milan 2026 Olympics is a step in the right direction, we can't say we reached true gender equality until we part ways with this misogynistic standard.

This is one of the original Olympic sports. It has existed for 102 years, and women are still excluded from it. So how can the 2026 Winter Olympics be called the most gender-balanced Games in history if there is still an event that does not allow women to compete? Gender equality cannot be partial. It cannot be measured only by percentages or headlines. As long as even one sport remains closed to women, the claim of full equality feels incomplete. Representation matters, but real equality means access without exceptions.

About the Author

Maria Orlandini is a freshman at the American University of Rome who is double majoring in Communications and English Literature. Her passion for athletics, specifically women's sports, is what drives her goal to pursue a career in sports journalism.



THE OLYMPICS, FIFA, AND THE THREE S'S by Christopher Teixeira

In early February of 2026, the President of Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), Gianni Infantino, declared that the ban imposed on the Russian Football Federation "has not achieved anything" and "has just created more frustration and hatred," leading to a comment suggesting that no country should ever be banned from playing football. Following this, only a day after, the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Kirsty Coventry, made a similar comment to keep sport a "neutral ground... A place where every athlete can compete freely, without being held back by the politics or divisions of their governments". This triggered many conversations, but the main one this article will cover is: What is FIFA and the IOC's general role in politics? Given that both are the main governing bodies of the world's largest sports it is reasonable to assume that the position they take is influential. Hence, this article will examine three key terms and analyze these international organizations role in international relations via their hosting of the World Cup and Olympics respectively.

The three terms entail; *soft power*, *sports washing*, and *sports diplomacy*. The former may be defined by a country's use of non-traditional resources such as "cultural attraction, ideology and international institution" to "get others to want what you want" (Nye 1990). Then, the latter may be defined

as "the deployment of sport by a state entity for the purposes of laundering a country's image and reputation" (Burton & Naraine 2023). Finally, using the definition by the President of FIFA, sports diplomacy may be defined as "the use of sport to realize policy goals, to help bring about positive social change" (Infantino 2021). In terms of FIFA and the IOC, they have used sport to increase their global outreach via funding for educational and social programs, empowering people through their 'Olympism 365' and 'Football Unites the World' campaigns. In turn, this has expanded their respective soft power, subsequently triggering governments to reassess their investment into sport, leading to more sport's diplomatic efforts but also more accusations of sports washing by FIFA, the IOC and state governments/ officials.

The clearest example of this comes with FIFA and a glance at who the recent hosts of the World Cup have been / will be from 2018 to 2034. This includes Russia, Qatar, the United States of America, Spain, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. From this list, Russia is currently facing international scrutiny for its 'special military operation' in Ukraine: Qatar has been accused of various human rights violations, including slavery and killings of journalists, in preparation for its hosting of the tournament (Human Rights Watch 2022); the US is on the brink of a democratic collapse with the enabling of an executive military force



and killing of civilians; Spain and Morocco, while not perfect, are not the former; while Saudi Arabia is under a dictatorial crown rule that kills opposition and has been accused of similar practices that Qatar was accused of in build up to 2022 (Human Rights Watch 2024). The promise behind hosting the tournament in these countries is that FIFA, via its 'rules for hosting the World Cup', comparable to that of the IOC's 'Criteria of assessment to be an Olympic host', has standards which states must abide by to be eligible to host, theoretically promoting FIFA's stated humanitarian values. However, as evidenced with Russia, Qatar and now the US, these standards seem to be a farce and clear evidence of sports washing. Conversely, it seems that the IOC has not gone the way of FIFA, but this is also the same organization that held two Olympic games (1936 Winter and Summer ones) under Nazi Germany rule. This is furthered by recalling the IOC President's stance on Russian participation and so to see the IOC shift its positions to more conservative leanings would not be a surprise.

Ultimately, this begs the final question of why? Why subtly, but at the same time, why explicitly, shift social positions? The answer, at least one of them, comes from following the money. For the state hosting, FIFA, and the IOC, enormous profits are derived from tourism, advertising space, ticket sales, etc... Any negative press that comes will eventually be swept under the rug, and, as

evidenced by the organization's steadfast position in making sports politically neutral and socially positive, it can be turned against those who question the true nature of their 'sports diplomacy'. It is an easy position to take that masks accountability as inclusivity and ensures continued profit.

In conclusion, FIFA and the IOC are no strangers to the world of politics. Having become residents within the realm, their indomitable soft power makes it so that whoever they choose to bolster, even if only briefly, enjoys an elevated global standing, which often precipitates an increase to state revenue. While the power possessed by these international organizations remains apparent, they cannot and should not stifle social change and accountability. Through transparency, literacy, and critical inquiry, their corruption can be seen, understood, and challenged.

About the Author

Chris Teixeira is a senior at the American University of Rome and President of the International Relations & Global Politics Club as well as the founder of the AUR Culture Club and AUR Debate Society. Fluent in English, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian. Chris is a dual Brazilian and United States citizen with a natural gift for gab. When not coolly connecting the academic community in Rome, he is on fire for CR Flamengo.





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