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## The Paris 2024 Olympic Games: An archetype of the politicisation of major international sporting events

France is on the home straight for organising the Paris Olympic Games, which will run from 26 July to 11 August 2024, before moving on to the Paralympic Games from 28 August to 8 September. While the country should be delighted to be hosting the world's biggest event, it seems to be caught up in controversies inherent to the preparations and drawbacks of the Olympic adventure. Only just over one in two French people are looking forward to the Games, as the celebration of sport has given way to questions around transport, security and budget.

It is important to note that this disenchantment is not specific to Paris, France or even the Olympic games. It affects all major events, and one need only look at the drop in the number of bids to host the Summer Games or Football World Cups to understand the scale of the phenomenon. With the number of athletes entering various disciplines rising by 40% over the last 40 years, the financial, logistical and human resources required for organising such events do little to encourage countries to embark on the Olympic adventure.

Just look at the last two editions of the Summer Games: while some may legitimately consider that the health situation in Tokyo in 2021 made it a special case, the Rio Olympics did not attract local crowds and produced numerous white elephants – in other words, burdensome assets, the upkeep costs of which are not in line with their usefulness or value.

Today, only a few countries are capable of organising events of this nature, either because, rather than use public budgets, they would subcontract the Games to private companies to produce a wonderful TV show for the whole planet to enjoy (the US for example) or because they have a free hand to thrust them upon their population and the resources that go with it. This commitment is obviously not philanthropic and is part of an ongoing logic of diplomatic influence, clearly in line with various theories of soft power.

'Sportwashing', similar to 'greenwashing', is not a new phenomenon, but it has taken on unprecedented proportions in recent years, together with the economic development of the sports sector and its share of the media audience. The Olympic Games in Beijing in

2008 and 2022, the Sochi Games in 2014, and the Football World Cup in Qatar in 2022 have all been used as vectors of influence for the organising countries, and even more so for their leaders, who found a golden opportunity to restore or polish their international reputations.

It is not a fairytale that the Olympic Games are all about. In our tense times of contested globalisation, climate crisis or information revolution, the Olympic games sometimes seem like events from the old days, those of the Cold War, decolonisation, when the acknowledgement of the 'other' and bringing people closer together only seemed possible through the organisation of such international events. This seems irrelevant nowadays. With the internet and the globalisation of tourism and culture, major events are no longer seen as something out of the ordinary, as a happy interlude in a 'real' world that remains on the sidelines, under stress.

The recent debate surrounding the adoption of the Olympic truce by the UN is a good illustration of this situation. Although such a truce had always been adopted by consensus, this year, Russia called for a vote, considering "unacceptable" the absence in the text of a reference to the "principles of equal and non-politicised access" to sporting competitions. The recurrent tensions between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Russian Federation, since the former abandoned its legendary neutrality to condemn the latter's invasion of Ukraine, illustrate this. Since then, there has been a constant and tense exchange between Thomas Bach, the IOC president, and Vladimir Putin. Putin even announced that the BRICS would organise their own games, to be held in Kazan, south-west Russia, a month before the Olympic Games. The IOC's final decision to allow the participation of Russian athletes under a neutral banner clearly illustrates that the politicisation of sport is not an 'off-the-grid' reality, but a constant that continues to gain weight globally. The tensions in many sports federations (boxing and fencing, for example) already illustrate this daily.

Does this mean that the pacifying power of sport has disappeared and that new generations will not experience the same emotions as their elders in front of the images of the two Koreas marching together in Sydney in 2000? No, just that, as any lever of influence, sport cannot be as exempt from major geopolitical issues as it claims to be.

No country is exempt from sending out political messages during a major sporting event. Sport is a major tool of influence and is widely seen as such. To legitimise the organisation of the Games, France put forward the idea that they would be "exemplary in environmental terms", popular, entirely self-financed and genuine growth accelerators. To complement this with an image that appeals internationally, after the *Gilets Jaunes* or the recent urban riots, France has decided to showcase its museum-like character by organising sporting events at iconic sites known all over the world, such as the Eiffel Tower and the Château de Versailles.

In the end, even though it is certainly not the original ambition of the political actors who carried Paris 2024, the Games are likely to represent France as much as an episode of *Emily in Paris*.