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France's Sports Strategy and the Phenomenon of Sportswashing

A case study of the 2024 Paris
Summer Olympics and Paralympics

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Abstract

Traditionally, sportswashing has served as a short-hand way to criticise and accuse non-democratic countries of strategically using investments in sport, sports clubs and sports events to distract from or cover up oppressive practices. This thesis investigates sportswashing through a case study of the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics and Paralympics, aiming to assess whether a practice commonly associated with autocratic regimes could also be applied to democratic contexts. Through the development of an original typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing and the completion of a qualitative content analysis of press kits, campaigns and discourses by the French government and state subsidiaries, France’s political and diplomatic motivations for hosting the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games are analysed as well as their alignment with either form of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing is evaluated. The study shows that the French sports strategy contains elements of both types and that a further category called ‘hybrid sportswashing’ may be necessary to fully cover the use of sports and sports mega-events by democratic states.

Key words: *sportswashing, France, 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympics, case study, content analysis, systemic sportswashing, opportunistic sportswashing, hybrid sportswashing*

List of Abbreviations

AFD: Agence Française de Développement (French Development Agency)

ANS: Agence Nationale du Sport (National Sports Agency)

ANSES: Agence Nationale de Sécurité Sanitaire de l'Alimentation, de l'Environnement et du Travail (French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health Safety)

CNOSF: Comité National Olympique et Sportif Français (French National Olympic and Sports Committee)

COJOP: Comité d'Organisation des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques de Paris 2024 (Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games)

CPSF: Comité Paralympique et Sportif Français (French Paralympic and Sports Committee)

EU: European Union

FICS: Finance in Common Summit

FIFA: Fédération Internationale de Football Association

IOC: International Olympic Committee

ISO: International Organisation for Standardisation

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PRISME: Pôle de Référence Inclusif et Sportif Métropolitain (Metropolitan Inclusive and Sports Reference Centre)

SOLIDEO: Société de Livraison des Ouvrages Olympiques (Olympic Works Delivery Company)

UEFA: Union of European Football Associations

UK: United Kingdom

WHO: World Health Organisation

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1 Introduction

Historically, France has been a successful sporting nation in various disciplines, ranking fifth among the most victorious countries in the Olympic Games with a total of 910 medals (Olympedia, n.d.). France is also home to big sporting events with a long tradition, such as the tennis Grand Slam Roland Garros or the most well-known cycling race, the Tour de France.

Over the last decade, France has been the host nation of several major sport events, namely the 2016 men's football UEFA European Championship, the 2017 men's handball World Cup, the 2019 FIFA women's World Cup, the 2021 women's basketball European Championship, the 2023 Rugby World Cup and most recently, the 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The relationship between politics, diplomacy and sport is well documented and reaches as far back as Ancient Greece. Over the course of history, the usage of sport ranges from a means to bring old enemies together, as showcased with the example of the 'Ping-Pong diplomacy' between China and the United States, to a punitive tool illustrated with the boycotts against South Africa during apartheid.

Moreover, it is well known that sports can be a source of soft power, either through excellent athletic performances or through successful hosting as sporting mega-events draw the world's attention, further fuelled by the contemporary media landscape.

In recent years, due to globalisation, new competitors have entered the sports world, trying to establish themselves as sporting nations through investments in national as well as foreign leagues and clubs and through bidding to host international sports events. These governments investing in sports have been critiqued of 'sportswashing' and accused of strategically using the hosting of sports events to divert from repressive practices in their home nations.

France has faced many upheavals in the last decade, the country was a victim of various terrorist attacks, numerous civic protest movements from the agricultural sector to the infamous ‘Gilets jaunes’¹ and political unrest. The country has been experiencing a deeper political divide with the right-wing as well as the left-wing gaining increased approval in society while current president Emmanuel Macron’s party falls further behind in popularity. Internationally, France remains a global player but has been losing power and influence in its former colonies to the benefit of Russia and China. These national crises, decline in military and diplomatic presence in Africa with several Francophone African countries cutting their martial ties with France or downgrading the official position of the French language (In On Africa 2025), and geopolitical change of order provide a fruitful foundation for sportswashing.

However, the concept of sportswashing has predominantly been associated with autocratic regimes and newly industrialised countries while leaving a gap of Western democratic cases like France.

The striking number of sports events organised by France in the last ten years raises questions about its motivations for hosting and if they differ from the interests of sportswashing-labelled regimes.

Addressing this gap matters because for the concept of sportswashing to be analytically useful it needs to be applied to various parts of the world. A clear pillar of this thesis is thus the investigation of whether a practice commonly associated with autocracies finds breeding ground in a democracy. In this dissertation the case of France will bring the test field for this query.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to fill the academic gap of the concept of sportswashing being applied to a democratic country, to understand French motivations for hosting

¹ In November 2018, demonstrations took place in opposition to a proposed fuel tax increase. The protesters gained the name *Gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) after the bright traffic safety vests they wore. These initial protests found broad support among the French public and quickly grew in scale.

large sports events, as well as to contribute to scholarship and theory development on sportswashing. Furthermore, it aims to point out the resemblances and differences of France's sports strategy from types of sportswashing. Hence, this thesis will answer the following research questions:

1. What are France's political and diplomatic motivations for hosting the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games?
2. How do the French motivations and practices align with the features of 'systemic' and 'opportunistic' sportswashing?

The thesis develops an analytical typology of 'systemic sportswashing' and 'opportunistic sportswashing' in order to analyse the 2024 Paris Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games and to better understand the nuances of the phenomenon of sportswashing.

In relation to soft power and nation branding, sportswashing in this dissertation is understood to be one possible tool for states to achieve cultural and political attractiveness, foreign policy goals and/or improve their international standing. Hence, both 'systemic' and 'opportunistic' sportswashing are embedded in the concept of soft power but the typology aims to highlight and clarify their differences in approach. Both forms of sportswashing are seen as part of a continuation of a state's soft power and branding strategies.

1.2 Relevance

Besides the lack of literature on Western democratic cases, this thesis is relevant in two other aspects.

First, the popularity of sport which is not only witnessed with the number of Europeans who practice a sport but also the huge sums of money which are invested in European sports clubs, leagues and events. Sport matters to large numbers of people and plays a significant role in their lives regardless of nationality, class, gender or age. It is also one of the few remaining forms of 'content' that generate large audience figures, enjoying an incomparable media presence, further backed

by the extensive TV subscriptions, which makes it as attractive to media companies and sponsors as it does to governments and states (Skey 2023, 759).

Second, sport has always been an important part of politics but has developed into a unique foreign policy strategy and diplomatic tool which is also of relevance to an institution like the European Union (EU). “The contemporary era is one in which sport has become an increasingly popular means for boosting the profile of states, managing relations between states and looking to shift the debate around particular states” (Ibid., 758).

The case of France is especially relevant in those aspects with around 60 per cent of French people aged fifteen or older indicating that they practice a sport at least once per week (Lombardo and Müller 2024) and 118 sports federations spread across the country. Also, nearly one in five people in France holds a subscription to a pay TV channel such as Canal+, DAZN, beIN Sports or RMC Sport (*L'Équipe* 2024).

Moreover, as a founding member and the second largest economy in the European Union after Germany, France is a leading country in the EU and plays a significant role in shaping its policies.

Finally, as touched upon previously, the dominance of non-Western cases in sportswashing literature leaves the framework of sportswashing incomplete. Including democratic states like France and exploring this gap can lead to the refinement of existing theories and definitions as well as the development of a more nuanced understanding of sportswashing practices.

2 Literature review

The term ‘sportswashing’ is a neologism and was first used by human rights advocates in 2015 to describe Azerbaijani dictator Ilham Aliyev’s efforts ahead of the European Games in Baku (Vincent 2015; Akhundova 2015), defining them as “attempt[s] to distract from [Azerbaijan’s] human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events” (Sport for Rights 2015, 1).

Since then, sportswashing has made its appearance in the general public lexicon and is understood to be a “short-hand way of criticising non-democratic regimes for using investment in sport, sports clubs and sports events to detract from illiberal practices in their home countries” (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2023, 1).

However, while sportswashing has become mainstream in media reporting (Skey 2023, 750), in academia, the concept lacks a universal definition and coherent operationalisation (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2023, 2; Costa and Moriconi 2024, 4).

Sportswashing has been framed within the broader discourse of soft power and nation branding or image management with hosting sporting mega-events as most opted for and preferred means (Grix and Houlihan 2014; Skey 2023; Grix 2012a; Fan 2009). Global sporting events generate large media audiences, which make them particularly attractive for public diplomatic purposes (Skey 2023, 756) as they provide the host with a chance to rewrite its history and to reshape narratives that bolster extant power relations (Boykoff 2022, 343). “Sportswashers use mega-events to try to foment national prestige and to convey economic or political advancement” (Ibid., 342).

Many authors discuss the political use of sports mega-events and address how states are increasingly using sports mega-events as part of their soft power strategy (Grix and Houlihan 2014; Grix and Brannagan 2016; Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015). They make the point that the possible positive effect on a nation’s image has shifted “from being a welcome consequence to a significant justification for

investing in hosting sports mega-events” (Grix and Houlihan 2014, 572). Large-scale sporting spectacles are used as a mechanism to acquire cultural and political attraction (Grix and Brannagan 2016). Especially the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics have been seen as popular ways to polish a country’s reputation, build soft power and provide a country with the opportunity to brand itself on a regional or global level, so called nation branding (Freeman 2012; Skey 2023, 758).

This mechanism as part of soft power strategies is attractive to a variety of categories of states with different political systems and at various stages of economic development (Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015). Hence, much research focuses on emerging states or autocratic regimes, non-Western states, analysing how hosting sporting events lies in their soft power quest, their attempt to obtain recognition as a great power or to increase their global profiles and standing (Grix and Kramareva 2017; Giulianotti 2015; Skey 2023, 758). They seek to boost their “reputational capital [...] by associating themselves with positive brands, events or organizations, notably those associated with and/or based in the West” (Skey 2023, 752). Common case studies are Brazil and the 2014 FIFA World Cup or the 2016 Rio Olympics (Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015; Grix and Lee 2013), Russia and the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi (Grix and Kramareva 2017) or the 2018 FIFA World Cup, China and the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Giulianotti 2015; Grix and Lee 2013), the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa (Grix and Lee 2013) and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2023; Grix and Brannagan 2024). The World Cup in Qatar is an example which illustrates the fact that sportswashing remains a silent gamble and does not always come with guarantees of success for the host countries (Boykoff 2022, 348). Increased scrutiny and global pressure generated by the sport event can lead to changes or force reforms that do not overlap with the host’s original sportswashing plans (Ibid., 346).

The concept of nation branding has also been applied to understand events held in the West (Skey 2023, 758). Germany and the 2006 FIFA World Cup as well as the UK and the 2012 London Olympics (Grix 2012a; Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015; Grix and Brannagan 2024) are common empirical cases employed to showcase this use of sport for non-sporting aims, namely, to alter an international

image among foreign publics and/or to enhance international prestige. “Place branding has [...] been portrayed as a positive feature of the contemporary era that can be used to improve relations between states as they strive to build and/or improve their reputations” (Skey 2023, 758). States benefit by showcasing themselves internationally, leading to an increase in soft power or the ability to pursue national interests in international relations (Grix 2012b, 4). Hosting sports mega-events has hence become part of a state’s soft power package, a mechanism enabling states to pursue politics to promote their interests or a strategy to achieve a multitude of foreign policy goals (Grix, Brannagan, and Lee 2019; Grix and Brannagan 2024).

What distinguishes nation branding efforts from sportswashing practices is that “nation branding is concerned with a country’s whole image on the international stage covering political, economic and cultural dimensions” (Fan 2009, 2) while sportswashing only puts a name on the practice of using positively-connotated sports events to deflect from or to hide ongoing negatives in the host nation.

Nation branding is a strategic tool pursued for various purposes and goals, including boosting tourism or attracting investments by highlighting the country’s strengths, know-how and capacities in order to make it stand out on the world stage without a specific intent to mask or manipulate. Although the very selective projection of an image, consciously hiding unattractive aspects when attempting to cultivate or protect a brand shows nation branding as not a truly neutral tool (Berenskötter 2024, 1359).

A nation brand is often multidimensional and entails various elements such as “people, place, culture/language, history, food, fashion, famous faces (celebrities), global brands etc.” generating various associations in the minds of people (Fan 2009, 3).

Sports can be one of these elements by which a state tries “to alter the image that outside people hold about the nation” (Ibid., 6). Sportswashing hence becomes one of several tools used to achieve branding objectives and can be considered a subgroup of nation branding.

Besides the hosting of sporting events, research has been conducted on the purchase of Western-based clubs and players by foreign sovereign wealth funds and other state-backed financial institutions (Krzyzaniak 2018). Recurrent empirical examples are the sports investment strategies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2023; Boykoff 2022; Costa and Moriconi 2024).

Methodologically, much research resorts to comparative studies to showcase the differences in the soft power strategies of democratic capitalist countries and autocratic states which have hosted sports mega-events.

Sportswashing is viewed as an initial step on a long-term continuum that will eventually lead towards soft power gains (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2023, 8). It is a strategy, similar to sports diplomacy, consisting of using sport to achieve different foreign policy goals (Grix and Brannagan 2024, 3; 6).

To achieve these specific foreign policy goals, the same means (sports mega-events) are chosen but the strategy and the rationale behind it is influenced by geopolitics, different histories, regime types, economic systems and levels of development (Ibid., 2-3).

The concept of sportswashing is also defined by some authors as a transaction, a bi-directional relationship as it cannot be undertaken alone. Grix, Dinsmore and Brannagan argue that sportswashing strategies would not be available to non-democratic regimes without the encouragement and opportunities provided by the democratic global capitalism of the ‘West’ and that this reciprocal relationship entails economic, cultural and social capital gains for all parties involved (Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan 2023, 6). “Sportswashing reveals political fault lines and heightens economic contradictions” (Boykoff 2022, 349).

However, much of the literature focuses only on one end of this relationship, scrutinizing the interests and motives of the states investing while disregarding the countries at the receiving end.

Interestingly, while soft power has been discussed as a legitimate goal for all states, sportswashing is rarely, if ever, applied to activities by Western states. It is notable that the term sportswashing tends to be employed on a narrow range of authoritarian

non-Western actors even though “sportswashing can emerge in both authoritarian and democratic political spaces” (Boykoff 2022, 342; 348).

In conclusion, after reviewing various author’s writings on sportswashing, it is noteworthy that these works collectively lack a unified definition of sportswashing. The definitions diverge in focus and range from a tool of distraction to a part of a state’s soft power strategy over a mechanism to enhance international prestige to a capitalist transaction. The literature does not agree whether sportswashing is mainly about distraction, reputation building or branding.

Sportswashing has become a popular term when writing about different types of state actors which are either seeking to bolster or manage their reputations on the international stage. It is negatively connotated and calls into question these states’ activities but there is no established or agreed-upon universal categorisation of ‘sportswashing’.

This definitional challenge leads to a lack of conceptual clarity with no operationalizable framework to determine whether or to what degree a situation could be considered sportswashing. There is also a lack of nuance in distinguishing types of sportswashing.

The absence of sportswashing criteria and theoretical framework explains the choice to develop my own typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing attempting to bridge these gaps.

Moreover, sportswashing has only been applied to a few cases, all outside the West. However, as noted by Skey, for sportswashing to become a useful analytical concept, it needs to be applied to other parts of the world as well (Skey 2023, 760). The emphasis on non-Western cases with authoritarian regimes or newly industrialised countries as primary examples of sportswashing and the shortage of literature putting the concept in relation with democratic, capitalist Western states gives further reason to the writing of this thesis.

Drawing on a similar methodology as previous research, namely examining one particular sports event to assess a country’s sports strategy, this thesis will be based on a case study of the 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympics.

3 Theories and concepts

Drawing on the concepts of soft power, nation branding and sports diplomacy, I will in the following chapter establish my own typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing which will guide my case study of the 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympics later on.

The following three subsections are not to be treated in isolation but rather as related concepts informing the establishment of the typology. Soft power, nation branding and sports diplomacy conceptually frame ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing.

While both forms of sportswashing are considered parts of a state’s soft power strategies, systemic sportswashing with its emphasis on long-term investments in sport to shape global perceptions and assert legitimacy on the world stage aligns more closely with soft power as defined by Joseph Nye (Nye 1990, 166). By contrast, opportunistic sportswashing specifies how sport is leveraged for more tactical and short-term uses like domestic challenges rather than as part of a strategic, institutionalised sport engagement.

Nation branding theory provides details on how sport is utilised by states to create an attractive identity and positive values associations.

And sports diplomacy, as both a tool with a long-standing tradition and a constantly revised and expanded mechanism further specifies the operationalisation through which a country reaches its soft power or foreign policy goals.

3.1 Soft power

The general definition of power reads as “an ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not” (Nye 1990, 154) and for generations, the means to reach power were understood to be “the possession of population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military forces and political

stability” (Ibid.). However, after the Cold War, the definition of power lost its emphasis on military force, conquest or resources and moved to be the ability to change states’ behaviour (Ibid., 154-55). The changing nature of world politics exposed the limits of the traditional instruments of power and put forward the importance and attractiveness of intangible forms of power such as national cohesion, universalistic culture and international institutions (Ibid., 164). “A state may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other states want to follow it or have agreed to a situation that produces such effects” (Ibid., 166).

This aspect of power associated with attraction and intangible power resources was labelled co-optive or soft power by Joseph Nye (Ibid., 166-67). In contrast to hard or command power, which is traditionally linked to military might and economic capabilities, soft power highlights the potential of non-coercive means for a state to achieve its preferred outcomes in world politics. Indeed “if a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow” (Ibid., 167). Soft power describes the influence nations possess related to their culture, ideology, political values, institutions and foreign policy (Ibid., 167).

Since the American political scientist coined the term in 1990, soft power has found application in many different research fields and has become a well-established concept to analyse states’ endeavours. Also, the hosting of sporting events has been put in relation with a pursuit for soft power. However, the success of these actions and the process by which soft power can be accrued (or lost) is closely linked to credibility and reputation. “Soft power depends upon credibility, and when governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed” (Nye 2012, 152). The introduction of the term ‘soft disempowerment’ puts a name on these attempts at soft power increase that have backfired and led to reputational damage or loss (Brannagan and Rookwood 2016; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; 2018).

3.2 Nation branding

In a context where perceptions of international order are changing (Browning 2015, 196) and where a shift is happening in political paradigms, namely “a move from the modern world of geopolitics and [hard] power to the postmodern world of image and influence” (van Ham 2001, 4), the concept of nation branding made its appearance.

Nation branding can be defined as “a process by which a nation’s images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country’s reputation among a target international audience” (Fan 2009, 6). It includes a range of activities, from the creation of national logos and slogans to the installation of governmental bodies that manage and oversee long-term nation branding efforts (Kaneva 2011, 118).

However, branding is not only about questions of image but also of identity, status and recognition and establishing a positive national brand, with the mobilisation of identity and culture, is perceived to have become essential in securing material benefits as well as social or political resources (Browning 2015, 195; 196; 199; Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira 2017, 485).

Nation branding processes are to be understood as a response to “the need of states and state leaders to enhance both citizens and nation’s sense of ontological security and (self-)esteem” (Browning 2015, 195). “Ontological security prioritizes actors’ need to secure and stabilize a sense of subjectivity and identity” (Ibid., 198) and self-esteem is “achieved by excelling in activities valued by one’s peer group or society and gaining the respect of actors whose opinions matter” (Lebow 2008, 61). Recognition can also come from one’s own group members, hence branding exercises often target the domestic as much as the international audience (Browning 2015, 199).

National (self-)esteem and dignity were often thought of as won and lost in war, however in the new “‘attention economy’, where success [has become] dependent on being noticed through attracting and holding the attention of relevant audiences/

consumers”, new mechanisms for achieving national dignity have been forged with nation branding being one of them (Ibid., 200; 203).

Branding is pursued to highlight “one’s relevance, usefulness, and added value” with the goals of standing apart, enhancing international attractiveness and economic competitiveness as national success is increasingly believed to be dependent on a favourable and competitive identity (Browning 2015, 204; 207; Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira 2017, 482).

States thus engage in branding practices and invest in campaigns to establish and protect a stable sense of self but also to remind their citizens who they are, instilling a pride for the nation’s image and standing (Browning 2015, 205). Nation branding campaigns appeal to a nation’s sense of social cohesion and self-esteem (Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira 2017, 492) and these feelings of togetherness and pride can be used by and for the regimes’ own benefit.

Countries adopting nation branding campaigns are driven by a motivation to enhance their “attractiveness to transnational capital and market actors” and simultaneously a desire to establish their legitimacy on the global stage and/or back home (Ibid., 489). “Nation branding may be utilized to help secure the state’s preferred position in the international system, or to pursue particular goals” (Ibid., 490). Even though nation branding, contrary to public diplomacy, works at constituting and selling identity, not policy (Ibid., 488; 489).

Image and identity policy have always mattered to states, especially in their foreign policy relations (Ibid., 488), however globalisation and new technologies have increased interconnectedness and communications and thus enlarged the international audience(s) to which states are exposed (Ibid., 491).

Nation branding puts a name on these practices by how states try to manage their identities and enhance their soft power as the goal of nation branding “remains that of attracting others to visit and invest capital by encouraging them to identify with the nation” (Ibid, 492). Moreover, nation branding can be considered a strategic tool to improve a country’s competitive advantage in the international market, by attracting investments, tourists, human capital and trade (Kaneva 2011, 120; 122).

Sports and hosting sporting events thus provides states with an opportunity “to uphold consistent self-narratives and maintain positive recognition from both international and domestic audiences” (Browning 2015, 197) as well as a stage to shape their images and reputations or “to discipline narratives in order to secure sectional advantages” (Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira 2017, 496).

3.3 Sports diplomacy

In the post-modern information age, sport has proven to be an effective means to bring peoples and states together and hence to be a successful method of diplomacy and a relevant foreign policy tool (Murray 2012, 581). Traditional diplomacy rests on the foundations “to represent, promote and advance a nation’s core values and interests” (Ibid., 578).

Sports diplomacy was born out of the domain of public diplomacy and defines the practice of using athletes and sports events “to engage, inform, and create a favourable image amongst foreign publics and organisations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to achieving a government’s foreign policy goals” (Murray 2012, 581). Sports diplomacy covers the “representative and diplomatic activities undertaken by sports people on behalf of and in conjunction with their governments” (Ibid.) as well as the endorsement of international sporting competitions by all kinds of governments (Ibid., 584).

In recent years, four schools of thought of sports diplomacy have emerged (Murray 2020, 9).

First, traditional sports diplomacy focuses on the opportunities created by sport for governments to showcase different variations of superiority, ranging from athletic abilities to ideologies of particular socio-economic and political systems to skills in the organisation and hosting of a sports mega-event (Murray 2020, 10; 2012, 584). Traditional sports diplomacy “can be defined as the opportunistic use, strategic exploitation, and, in some cases, abuse of elite sports, sportspeople, and sporting events to advance a state’s foreign policy objectives” (Murray 2020, 10). Sport and mega-events are chosen as tools through which a government can project and amplify messages to a wider audience than could have been reached through

conventional diplomatic channels (Ibid.). While hard power and the long-established diplomatic ways are still important, they no longer engage or hold the same weight amongst the public (Murray 2012, 581). Sports mega-events also allow for the promotion of “international understanding and friendship” and the dismissal of stereotypes and prejudices (Murray and Pigman 2013, 5).

Moreover, boycotts and the banning of other states from international competitions as well as the opportunity for leaders and heads of state to meet informally are understood to be part of traditional sports diplomacy (Murray 2020, 11; 12).

Second, new sports diplomacy “is a far more inclusive, amateur, and networked concept that embodies the type of state, nonstate, and public partnerships characteristic of 21st-century diplomacy” (Ibid., 13). The new sports diplomacy translates into ministries of foreign affairs becoming “sporting ‘gatekeepers’ which (manage) strategies or policies aimed at enhancing a nation’s international soft power image and reputation” (Ibid.). Such strategies revolve around “connecting people and institutions”, “enhancing sport for development” and “supporting innovation and integrity in (national) and world sport” (Ibid.). New sports diplomacy strategies build on “linkages with neighbours, maximize trade, tourism and investment opportunities” (Ibid., 13-14).

Third, sport-as-diplomacy “examines the notion that sport is a form of diplomacy” and focuses mainly on nonstate sporting actors’ practice and exhibition of political and diplomatic characteristics, qualities and capacities (Ibid., 15). Such a key actor is the International Olympic Committee (IOC) which is not bound to national interests and can hence play an important role in mitigating conflict and promoting peace. “State-sponsored sports diplomacy initiatives [...] will always be overshadowed and driven by national, introspective interests” (Ibid., 17).

Last, sports antidiplomacy describes “the intentional abuse of sport to drive people, nations, and states apart” and analyses the crossing of moral, ethical and legal lines by nations, sportspeople and nonstate actors to simply ‘win’ (Ibid., 18). In short, all actions that go “against the ideal character of both sport and diplomacy” (Ibid., 19). Sports antidiplomacy also studies the abuse of sport for political gain, its link with nationalism (Freeman 2012), violence and even terrorism because “just as sport, sportspeople, and sporting events can be co-opted to amplify positive diplomatic

messages they can also be targeted, abused, and exploited to disseminate antidiplomatic messages” (Murray 2020, 20). Providing the host with the chance to rewrite its history and reshape narratives, sports mega-events can even be used to smooth the path for war or clear space for hard-power interventions like an invasion (Boykoff 2022, 343).

Sports diplomacy and soft power are features of international relations that allow states to manage conflicts and build connections through attraction rather than force. Diplomacy encompasses the means to realise a country’s foreign policy goals and sports diplomacy constitutes one of those many means (Murray 2012, 581) and can thus be part of a state’s package to increase its soft power, in the same way nation branding does.

3.4 France’s sports diplomacy

According to the official website of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs², French sports diplomacy is a separate foreign policy tool and is based on three main aspects.

The first part concerns the organisation of major international sporting events in order to strengthen France’s international influence. By hosting major sporting events, France continues to promote its vision and expertise in favour of accessible, inclusive and sustainable sport competitions. In addition, it aims to draw a long-term favourable legacy for the nation and its territories.

The second part concerns the development of sport as a tool for cooperation and rapprochement with foreign and bilateral partners. French sports diplomacy accompanies and supports partnerships aimed at strengthening sports ecosystems, for example in Africa. Funds are made available to embassies to support sports projects that facilitate access to sports infrastructures or equipment, strengthen sport governance, develop high-level sport and/or support policies of inclusion, anti-discrimination and reintegration through sport.

² (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, n.d.-a)

Sport is thus used as a push for development as well as a boost for the international establishment of French companies in the sports sector.

The third part concerns the use of sport as a tool for influence and attractiveness not only through the performance of French athletes but also through the exhibition of innovation and national know-how in different sectors, including economic, social and environmental. French sports diplomacy aims to ensure that France's positions prevail on major issues related to sport such as governance, ethics, the fight against doping, match-fixing and the fight against discrimination in international organisations such as the IOC, the United Nations or the European Union. In addition, it seeks to promote the French language at sporting events, particularly at the Olympics and Paralympics, in order to establish French as the "language of sport and Olympism".

According to the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games were a "unique opportunity to promote France, its territories and its values".

In establishing working groups consisting of government departments, sporting federations, major sporting businesses and a new French Olympic committee as well as nominating a sports ambassador, France's sports diplomacy showcases elements of new sports diplomacy (Murray 2020, 14). However, the emphasis on organising and hosting large sporting events are key elements of traditional sports diplomacy.

3.5 Sportswashing

In order to classify the concept of sportswashing, many authors have come up with various definitions. They, however, differ in relation to the entities performing sportswashing and their objectives, whether it is to deflect attention, improve a reputation or both (Bergkvist and Skeiseid 2024, 1094).

This thesis will follow Simon Chadwick's definition of sportswashing which reads as "a means by which a country can deflect audiences' attention away from less

favourable perceptions of a country via a programme of investment in sport” (Chadwick 2022, 696).

Thus, differently to the terms ‘greenwashing’ and ‘whitewashing’, the ‘washing’ part of the concept focuses on “strategies of distraction and positive association rather than concealment or deceptive manipulation” (Skey 2023, 752). As a ‘sensitizing concept’, sportswashing “draws attention to the ways in which connections with sports are used in processes of consociation and deflection” (Ibid., 759-60).

Sportswashing is also a social relationship which involves multiple audiences, it can target a country’s internal population as much as an external, global public (Boykoff 2022, 342).

For now, researchers have neither established a framework nor developed criteria for classifying and evaluating situations and actions as sportswashing or not (Bergkvist and Skeiseid 2024, 1100). However, “the form that sportswashing takes depends on two central factors: the political context of the mega-event host and the intended audience” (Boykoff 2022, 346).

Taking these two factors into consideration, a typology of sportswashing can be developed which can be labelled ‘opportunistic sportswashing’ and ‘systemic sportswashing’.

‘Systemic sportswashing’ relates to the deliberate strategy whereby investments in sports and the hosting of sporting events are key parts of a nation’s efforts to improve its global image and build positive associations. This category of sportswashing is characterised by being state-driven, institutionalised and long-term. ‘Systemic sportswashing’ is deeply embedded in national policy with the intent to repair a damaged (global) reputation and to appear as a legitimate power on the world stage.

The use of sports is structured into long-term plans aiming to create a lasting positive image and influence or to reshape a nation’s image and global reputation. ‘Systemic sportswashing’ thus refers to the sustained efforts and continuous investments in international sporting events or sports ownership as part of a broader political strategy.

This long-term and institutionalised effort is directed at an international audience and tends to be more characteristic of authoritarian states.

Qatar's large-scale investments in infrastructure and facilities to host global sports events, most notably the 2022 FIFA World Cup as well as their purchase of the French football club Paris Saint-Germain illustrates 'systemic sportswashing'. These significant financial investments and the global media coverage they prompted were part of a long-term plan to enhance their reputation.

'Opportunistic sportswashing' relates to the situational use of sports to momentarily deflect from controversies, boost national prestige and address social issues. This category is characterised by being short-term and being used as a temporary tool in response to specific domestic crises and for tangible national benefits rather than long-term image building.

The involvement in sport is not part of a broader well-coordinated strategy but the hosting of large-scale sports events is used as an opportunity to address immediate reputational, political, economic, national issues or problems. Sport turns into a short-term, reactive means to divert attention, to manage crises or to initiate changes.

High-profile sports events are leveraged to shift the focus away from negatives happening in the home country or used as a pretext to finally deal with those.

This type of sportswashing is more common in democratic or semi-democratic states and targets mainly the domestic audience but also the global community.

Democracies lean more towards the opportunistic use of sportswashing due to the political system's structure. Characterised by short-term electoral cycles, public accountability, media pluralism and multiple stakeholders involved in the decision-making process, democratic states are more likely to use sports mega-events to distract from controversies, showcase competence or divert attention from political tension than adopt a systemic and organised strategy as this would be harder to implement without receiving criticism or backlash.

Moreover, democracies already enjoy a level of international legitimacy and are thus in less need of long-term strategies in order to enhance or reshape their global image and reputation via the use of sport and large sporting events.

Typically, democracies are more transparent and accountable due to institutional checks and balances but systemic sportswashing could still be taking place in democracies, just under different labels. Collective and sustained branding efforts by government agencies, sports federations and other actors can bear resemblances to systemic sportswashing. Also, the pursuit of soft power objectives by democratic countries through sport might align with systemic sportswashing, even though it is not framed as long-term campaigns.

One example of ‘opportunistic sportswashing’ are the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games which the city capitalized on to promote a great urban transformation improving the quality of life and attraction of the city. Many construction projects were initiated, with the majority not even directly necessary for the Games themselves, “projects in sports infrastructure, conditioning and facilities only represented 9.1 per cent of the total of Olympic investments” (Brunet 1995, 8). The city of Barcelona’s use of the hosting of the Olympic Games illustrates the aspect of ‘opportunistic sportswashing’ in which sports mega-events serve to initiate changes.

The main differences between ‘systemic sportswashing’ and ‘opportunistic sportswashing’ lie thus in their approach, duration and objectives.

Table 1: Typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing

	Systemic sportswashing	Opportunistic sportswashing
Definition	The deliberate strategy whereby investments in sports and the hosting of sporting events are key parts of a nation’s efforts to improve its global image.	The situational use of sports to momentarily deflect from controversies, to address domestic issues and to initiate changes.
Characteristics	Long-term, state-driven, institutionalised, organised, strategic	Short-term, reactive, related to one specific event, temporary, situational
Audience	International	Domestic and international
Political context	Authoritarian	Semi-democratic and democratic
Examples	Qatar	Barcelona

4 Methodology and data collection

Based on the theoretical framework and concepts outlined in the previous chapter, the 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympics will be analysed according to the parameter of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing.

To determine whether the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games represent systemic or opportunistic sportswashing, this study will refer to a qualitative research approach, focusing on analysing official documents such as campaigns, press releases and discourses related to the Games published by the French government or French political spokespersons. This body of documents is completed with a report by the International Olympic Committee. The qualitative research method allows to gain an in-depth knowledge of France’s sports strategy.

Considering ‘systemic sportswashing’ and ‘opportunistic sportswashing’ as the two poles of a sportswashing scale, the main difference between them lies in their approach, duration and objectives. To examine how the French government framed the Games and to assess whether the sports investments were part of a long-term state policy or situational as well as to determine if the Olympics served as a strategic tool for diplomatic or economic gain, this thesis resorts to a case study of the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics and Paralympics.

4.1 Case study

A case study can be defined as “an empirical inquiry which investigates a phenomenon in its real-life context” (Priya 2021, 95). It is a “qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 373). Gerring defines a case study as “an intensive study of a single case or a small number of cases which draws on observational data and promises to shed light on a larger population of cases” (Gerring 2017, 28).

Case studies are considered an observational form of analysis as their goal is to explain the case under investigation while simultaneously clarifying more cases (Ibid., 29; 30).

When conducting a case study, multiple methods of data collection are used as it involves an in-depth study of an individual event as well as an analysis of the contextual embedding of it (Priya 2021, 95; 97). Several techniques of data collection are needed to grasp the complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Ibid., 97). A research only becomes a case study if it is possible to put it into a larger context and if there is an element of the study that can be generalised (Gerring 2017, 30). “Case studies allow for analytic generalisations in which a previously developed theory is used as a template to compare the empirical results of the case under study” (Priya 2021, 103). The explanatory power of a case study is strengthened by such generalizations (Ibid.). “The chosen case must be representative of a larger population in whatever ways are relevant for the larger argument” (Gerring 2017, 45).

Since a key feature of any case study is the intense focus on a single phenomenon, “researchers must be concerned with all possible sources of data” that may help explain the phenomenon (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010b, 370). Hence, a case study allows researchers to use any method of data collection which suits their purpose (Priya 2021, 95) and the research is usually not associated with only one type of data collection (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010b, 370).

There exist many different types of case studies and their goals may overlap but as this thesis mainly aims to develop and expand on the concept of sportswashing with an in-depth study of the 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympics, a descriptive case study seemed the most fitting.

“A descriptive case study is one that is focused and detailed, in which propositions and questions about a phenomenon are carefully scrutinized and articulated at the outset” (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010a, 288).

The purpose of a descriptive case study is to ‘describe’ a phenomenon in detail in its real-world context (Priya 2021, 96) and to assess it in detail and in depth, based on an articulation of a descriptive theory (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010a, 288).

“Descriptive studies seek to reveal patterns and connections, in relation to theoretical constructs, in order to advance theory development” (Ibid.).

A descriptive case study aligns with the thesis’ aims as it seeks to examine France’s sports strategy and to assess the extent to which it aligns with the predefined categories of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing.

4.2 Why the 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympics?

The choice to do a case study of the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics and Paralympics was first motivated by its timing and placing. After Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2021, the Paris Games were the most recent Olympics to be held on European soil, thus enhancing its relevance for a thesis in a programme of European Studies.

Second, the country of France combines national unrest, EU ambitions and global visibility, making Paris 2024 an analytically rich case as it provides enough empirical material to test and refine the typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing.

Lastly, as a French speaker, I was able to read publications in their original language and am thus more perceptive to nuances and implicit meanings in the documents. The following analysis therefore contains largely translated elements.

4.3 Content analysis

In order to find out France’s motivations for hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games and how they align with the predefined types of sportswashing, this thesis conducts a content analysis of selected press kits, campaigns and discourses.

Content analysis is a systematic, rigorous approach to the analysis of documents and simultaneously a flexible research method that finds application to various research problems and designs, either as a method by itself or in combination with other methods (White and Marsh 2006, 22–23).

Rather than a “basic content analysis” which is a quantitative research method, this thesis leans more toward an “interpretive” and “qualitative content analysis” as these two approaches allow researchers to focus on describing the meaning of communications in specific contexts rather than resorting to quantitative word counts (Drisko and Maschi 2015c, 1).

“Content analysis allows researchers to examine large amounts of data in a systemic fashion which helps to identify and clarify topics of interest”(Drisko and Maschi 2015a, 25). The method of content analysis works well with an exploratory or descriptive as well as an explanatory research design. The exploratory design allows to discover more about a specific situation or phenomenon, to generate knowledge of content and to better describe and define definitions, concepts and theory (Ibid., 32-33). Explanatory designs “examine the merit and utility of specified analytical constructs” (Ibid., 32). These two designs align well with the research questions and aims of this thesis.

Content analysis allows for an analysis that goes beyond what is overtly, literally, present in a communication (manifest content) to also examine what is implicit and implied by a communication across several sentences or paragraphs (latent content) (Drisko and Maschi 2015c, 2; 4). While it is often used descriptively, it can also be utilised to generate new concepts or theory as well as to test theory (Ibid., 2).

As this thesis leans more toward an interpretive and qualitative approach to content analysis, both manifest and latent content are considered.

“Qualitative content analysis is based on the interpretation of texts and focused on the research questions” (Ibid., 6). It can be defined as “a set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts of many kinds, addressing not only manifest content but also the themes and core ideas found in texts as primary content” (Drisko and Maschi 2015d, 82). Qualitative content analysis includes contextual information and latent content and are used to “explore new topics, describe complex phenomena in open systems, compare and contrast group differences, and develop or test theories” (Ibid., 85-86). It can thus be applied to both exploratory and explanatory research designs.

Qualitative content analysis does not employ any statistical analytical methods but maintains a more descriptive focus “on identifying categories or themes that both summarize the content found in the full data set and highlight key content” (Ibid., 82; 88). The objective is to convert a large amount of data into a concise summary of major findings.

4.4 Data

As mentioned earlier, this analysis draws on official documents published by the French government related to the Olympics and Paralympics as well as the final report on the Paris 2024 Games issued by the International Olympic Committee.

To ensure that the content of each document faithfully resembles France’s approach and objectives, when selecting documents, only those published directly by state authorities (the Government and the different Ministries) or state subsidiaries were included in the final sample.

The purposive sampling of this material, which was known to be representative of the French sports strategy, allows for identifying complete and accurate answers to the research questions and presenting the bigger picture of sportswashing in a democratic context (White and Marsh 2006, 35).

The selected material for the content analysis was known to be the most important data to provide useful evidence for testing the typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing and answering the research questions (Ibid., 27).

These key documents allow to gain an in-depth knowledge of France’s motivations for hosting the Olympics and Paralympics, extend the understanding of the foreign policy and soft power objectives of French authorities and how they align with sportswashing motivations and practices.

The final sample of the publicly available documents includes two press kits published solely by the Ministry of Sports and the Olympic and Paralympic Games:

- Ministère des Sports et des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques. *Des Jeux responsables et utiles, pour un héritage durable* (Responsible and useful Games, for a lasting legacy), March 2024. Dossier.

- Ministère des Sports et des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques. *Premier bilan des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques de Paris 2024* (First report on the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games), 12 September 2024. Dossier.

And two press kits in partnership with the French government as well as with the French National Olympic and Sports Committee, Paralympic France and the National Sports Agency, respectively:

- Gouvernement, Ministère des Sports et des Jeux olympiques et paralympiques. *Grande cause nationale 2024, Bouge 30 minutes chaque jour !* (Great national cause 2024, Move 30 minutes every day!), 2023. Dossier de presse.
- Ministère des Sports et des Jeux olympiques et paralympiques, Comité national olympique et sportif français, France paralympique, Agence nationale du sport. *Aider nos athlètes à réussir les Jeux à la maison* (Helping our athletes succeed at home), 1 December 2023. Dossier de presse.

Also included is a press kit published by the Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industrial and Digital sovereignty:

- Ministère de l'économie, des finances et de la souveraineté industrielle et numérique. *Bercy se mobilise pour les Jeux !* (Bercy mobilises for the Games), 5 October 2023.

Moreover, two discourses by former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe were included in the final sample:

- Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. *Lettre de mission à l'attention du délégué interministériel aux Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques* (Mission letter for the Interministerial Delegate for the Olympic and Paralympic Games), 27 November 2017.
- Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. *Discours de signature du protocole d'organisation des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques 2024* (Speech signing the Organising Protocol for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games), 14 June 2018.

Regarding the state subsidiaries, five press kits published by Paris 2024, the official pressroom of the Olympic and Paralympic Games were included:

- Paris 2024. *L'héritage international des Jeux de Paris 2024* (The international legacy of Paris 2024), 30 November 2023.
- Paris 2024. *Dossier de présentation des Jeux olympiques de Paris 2024 « Ouvrons grand les Jeux »* (Olympic Games Paris 2024 Media Presentation Kit “Games Wide Open”), July 2024.
- Paris 2024. *Dossier de présentation des Jeux paralympiques de Paris 2024 « Ouvrons grand les Jeux paralympiques »* (Paralympic Games Paris 2024 Presentation Kit “Paralympic Games Wide Open”), June 2024.
- Paris 2024. *Bilan des Jeux olympiques de Paris 2024* (The Paris 2024 Olympic Games in review), December 2024. Dossier de presse.
- Paris 2024. *Bilan des Jeux paralympiques de Paris 2024* (The Paris 2024 Paralympic Games in review), December 2024. Dossier de presse.

As well as one press kit published by SOLIDEO, the Olympic Works Delivery Company:

- Société de livraison des ouvrages olympiques (SOLIDEO). *L'héritage matériel des Jeux de Paris 2024* (The material legacy of the Paris 2024 Games), September 2023.

Finally, the official final report by the IOC was included to have an international perspective:

- International Olympic Committee. “IOC Final Report on Paris 2024”, 5 December 2024.

4.5 Coding

To identify elements of systemic and opportunistic sportswashing in the data material, this study draws on the five-phase qualitative analysis process outlined by Bingham (Bingham 2023) combining deductive and inductive coding strategies.

“Coding, or tagging, is the process of assigning elements of an analysed text to the construct to be measured” (Carle 2020). A code is to be understood as a label or name that describes what a particular meaning unit is about. A meaning unit can be a singular word, phrase, sentence or paragraph. The codes are then grouped together

in relation to their content or context to form categories (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017, 94).

Coding is used to identify and describe meanings within texts, to then reduce and summarise those meanings relevant to answer the research questions (Drisko and Maschi 2015d, 102).

The deductive coding system approach stands for the creation of a codebook prior to the analysis. It is a top-down approach in which a set of codes is developed based on the literature, research questions, existing frameworks and/or theory (Bingham 2023, 2). Main categories are derived from prior empirical research and theory and the coding definitions and/or rules are formulated from this category development (Drisko and Maschi 2015d, 106).

Deductive coding lists are typical for basic content analysis, but they can also be applied in qualitative content analysis (Ibid., 86; 88).

In contrast, inductive coding relates to the process of “reading through the data and identifying codes, categories, patterns, and themes as they emerge” (Bingham 2023, 2).

In this thesis, the categories for the analysis of the selected data are derived from the previously established typology of systemic and opportunistic sportswashing but the codes or sub-codes were developed as the data was analysed. “Systematic, detailed analysis processes that engage both deductive and inductive analytic strategies can support analytic transparency and can help researchers apply concepts from the literature and theory, which can in turn support the trustworthiness and applicability of the study” (Ibid., 2).

Drawing on Bingham’s five-phase process of qualitative analysis, the data was first organised and sorted by type and source (Ibid., 3-4).

Then, based on the two overarching dimensions of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’, a priori topic codes were developed reflecting broad categories that align with the thesis’ purpose and research questions (Ibid., 5).

The deductively generated categories read as follows:

- sport as part of a long-term national strategy,
- sport as a tool for global image management,
- sport as a tool for deflection,

- sport as a tool for tackling domestic issues,
- sport as a tool for large-scale societal changes.

In a third step, the data was inductively analysed within each category. The categories were thus predetermined but the specific codes were created in the course of the analysis. They emerged from the engagement with the data and were refined during the process of identifying topics that fit within these pre-established categories and that could later be developed into themes and findings (Ibid., 6).

Hence, the codes “investments”, “funding”, “creation of agencies” and “launching of programs” arose from the material and fall into the category “sport as part a long-term national strategy”.

The category “sport as a tool for global image management” combines the codes “new global reference” and “strengthening of diplomatic ties”.

The category “sport as a tool for deflection” covers the code “political deflection” while the category “sport as a tool for tackling domestic issues” encompasses the code “national health emergency”.

The codes “urban development”, “ecological transition”, “inclusion and accessibility” as well as “economy and employment” fall under the category of “sport as a tool for large-scale societal changes”.

Finally, combining Bingham’s phases four and five of interpreting and explaining the data, the codes were synthesised into theme statements that describe the patterns noticed in the data which were then related back to the theoretical framework of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing (Ibid., 7-8).

In summary, to leverage the strengths of both deductive and inductive analysis, I made use of a deductive coding approach with predefined categories while allowing codes to be inductively generated from the material.

Table 2: Codebook

Systemic sportswashing	Opportunistic sportswashing
Sport as part of a long-term national strategy - investments - hosting - creation of agencies - launching of programs	Sport as a tool for deflection - political deflection
Sport as a tool for global image management - new global reference - strengthening of diplomatic ties	Sport as a tool for tackling domestic issues - health emergency
	Sport as a tool for large-scale societal changes - urban development - ecological transition - inclusion and accessibility - economy and employment

This thesis approaches sportswashing as an empirical phenomenon and seeks to classify sportswashing into types (systemic and opportunistic) based on observable actions and their contexts. The sports strategy employed by France is examined with the aim to provide evidence of how sportswashing manifests in a democratic country and how the motivations and implementations resemble and/or differ from sportswashing features as outlined in the typology.

The analysis is thus anchored in observable reality, guided by the established typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing which provides a structured method and criteria to categorise the various strategies employed by states when hosting large sports events.

4.6 Limitations

While this methodological design is believed to be the right choice for answering the research questions and fulfilling this thesis' aims, there are some limitations to the method which need to be acknowledged.

First, the scope of the thesis is limited, the focus is on one case study (the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games) which may not provide a sufficiently broad perspective on sportswashing practices in democratic countries. This could limit the generalisability of the analytical findings to other contexts and states.

A comparative study could potentially further situate France's practices within a broader frame and highlight unique aspects of its strategy compared to other democratic countries hosting major sports events.

Second, while the qualitative approach offers depth, the heavy reliance on official documents, campaigns and press kits may present biases based on the available data, potentially overlooking other relevant viewpoints or critical voices such as civil society or independent media.

Third, the coding process and classification of France's sports strategy is subjective. Different researchers may code and categorise the data differently, hence leading to potential varied conclusions about France's engagement with sports and hosting large sports events. However, "differences in interpretation (are) more common in qualitative content analysis" (Drisko and Maschi 2015d, 84). Qualitative researchers are aware of the multiple interpretations that can arise from the close focus on the uniqueness of a text (White and Marsh 2006, 36).

Fourth, the typology of 'systemic' and 'opportunistic' sportswashing might not fully capture the manifestation of sportswashing in various political contexts. Motivations and strategies surrounding the hosting of sports mega-events may shift and hence the typology requires continuous re-evaluation. As the typology guides the deductive coding, "one limitation [...] is that texts or newly collected data may contain important ideas or perspectives that were not previously identified in the conceptual and research literature" (Drisko and Maschi 2015d, 106).

Reasons for these limitations are the length and time constraints of this thesis.

5 Analysis

France hosted the 2024 Summer Olympics and Paralympics in Paris from 26 July to 11 August and from 28 August to 8 September, respectively.

Elected in 2017 as host city by the International Olympic Committee, Paris welcomed athletes from 206 territories as well as the IOC Refugee Olympic Team for nineteen days of competition. Most of the 754 competition sessions in thirty-two sports and forty-eight disciplines were held in Paris, but some events took place in additional cities spread across France and its overseas territory of French Polynesia (International Olympic Committee 2024, 10; 12).

The Paralympic Games were held over eleven days and 169 delegations as well as the Paralympic Refugee team competed in twenty-two sports and twenty-three disciplines (Ibid., 13).

Moreover, the 2024 Paris Games marked the first time that both opening ceremonies for the Olympics and Paralympics were held outside a stadium at an Olympic Summer Game. Namely on water, along the river Seine and through the city centre, respectively. It was also the first time that fans were being allowed back in the stands since the Covid-19 pandemic (Ibid., 22).

In order to answer the research questions a descriptive case study of the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics and Paralympics supported by a content analysis will be undertaken.

According to the two definitions of the two types of sportswashing established previously, I will first examine whether the French sports strategy matches the characteristics of systemic sportswashing and then whether it fulfils the features of opportunistic sportswashing.

In the following analysis France's approach to the Games will thus be evaluated as a state-driven investment in sports and infrastructure that reflects a broader strategy to improve its global standing by looking at the establishment of political

institutions. Or as a reaction to domestic crises and political challenges by looking at campaigns and social policy initiatives introduced alongside the Games.

Moreover, the target audience of the initiatives will be assessed, determining whether they are primarily aimed at an international audience to improve the global perceptions of France or if they mainly target the domestic population to address or deflect from national issues.

5.1 Systemic sportswashing

I have defined ‘systemic sportswashing’ as the deliberate strategy whereby investments in sports and the hosting of sporting events are key parts of a nation’s efforts to improve its global image, with the characteristics of being long-term, state-driven and institutionalised.

5.1.1 Sport as part of a long-term national strategy

Since the IOC awarded France the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Lima in 2017 and since President Emmanuel Macron set the challenge of establishing France as one of the top five most decorated nations at the Olympics and Paralympics ever after the Tokyo 2021 Games, France has organised itself “to succeed”.

In 2019, the *Agence nationale du sport* (ANS) (National Sports Agency) was created and the *programme Ambition bleue* (programme Blue Ambition) was launched in 2020. The State’s commitment and the budget mobilised to directly support high performance sport by the Ministry of Sport and then by the ANS increased by 68 per cent between the Rio 2016 and Paris 2024 Games to reach a total of €113.9 million invested. Between 2017 and 2023, the funding of the Paralympic federations increased from €2.6 million to €8.4 million and personalised aid for athletes increased by €1 million, from €0.1 million to €1.1 million. Moreover, additional financial resources for high-level sport by the State reached nearly €300 million in 2024 (Ministère des Sports et des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques 2023, 7–9).

In general, since the creation of the ANS in 2019, the financial resources to support all the actors in the high-performance chain, from sports federations to coaches via *Le Plan Coach pour Paris 2024* (The Coach Plan for Paris 2024) to the *Maisons Régionales de la Performance* (Regional Performance Houses), have been reinforced year after year by the French State, demonstrating an institutionalised and organised sports strategy (Ibid., 10-13).

Investments in the sport sector have also resulted in the creation of the Sport Data Hub in 2020, endowed with €4.3 million per year since 2022, *le Plan de Transformation Numérique 2021 et 2022* (the Digital Transformation Plan 2021 and 2022) funded by the State to the tune of €4 million and the launch in 2019 of a *Programme Prioritaire de Recherche « Sport de très haute performance »* (Priority Research Programme “Very High Performance Sport”) for €20 million, decided jointly by the Ministries of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and the Ministry of Sport and the Olympic and Paralympic Games (Ibid., 14-15).

In addition, the State has undertaken massive investments in sports facilities throughout the country, as well as €1.3 billion invested in the construction and renovation of sixty-eight Olympic structures. The plan *5 000 terrains de sport Génération 2024* (5000 sports fields Generation 2024), with a budget of €300 million over three years, was deployed to support the construction and renovation of sports facilities (Ministère de l’Economie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique 2023, 6–7; Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2023, 7).

Apart from the annual sporting events organised in France such as the Roland-Garros tennis tournament or the Tour de France and the many competitions, championships and cups hosted since 2016, it is already known that over the next five years more than forty major international sporting events will see France as their host nation, including the 2030 Winter Olympics (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, n.d.-b).

This dynamic of continuing to host major sporting events underlines the long-term aspect of the French sports strategy, a characteristic of systemic sportswashing.

5.1.2 Sport as a tool for global image management

The Olympic and Paralympic Games took place under the slogan *Ouvrons grand les Jeux* (Games wide open) and were framed as “a new reference” for future Olympics regarding sustainability, gender equality and inclusivity.

The French government did not want these Olympic Games to be “simply successful but exemplary and prefigurative”. Apart from being spectacular, festive and popular, the Paris 2024 Games wanted to be more responsible, sustainable, united and gender-balanced, marking a new era of world events. “(The Games) must be exemplary in terms of the values of Olympism, ethics, transparency and sustainable development”³ (Philippe 2017).

The Paris 2024 Games were thus the time to show the whole world that “France will be at the time of Olympism in 2024. (The country) will be able to rise to the highest level, at the level of its tradition of Olympism, its know-how and its high standards. To host the Games. And obviously to shine there”⁴ (Philippe 2018).

Since all the spotlights of the planet were on France, the Olympics were an opportunity to showcase the country from its best side and highlight its know-how, its creativity, its openness and its unique heritage, as well as its universal values and its spirit of innovation.

In line with the country’s aims to host more sustainable, more urban, more inclusive and more youthful Olympics, the Games stood out as being the first ever Olympic Games with full gender parity and being the most gender-balanced Games to date as well as including more youth-oriented sports, with breaking making its Olympic debut (Paris 2024 2024a, 27). Also, to reach sustainability goals, the city made use of existing venues, used 100 per cent energy from renewable sources and noted a 50 per cent reduction in carbon emissions (International Olympic Committee 2024, 24; 33; 59; 62).

³ « Ils doivent être exemplaires au regard des valeurs de l’olympisme, de l’éthique, de la transparence et du développement durable. »

⁴ « La France sera à l’heure de l’olympisme en 2024. Elle saura se hisser au plus haut niveau, au niveau de sa tradition d’olympisme, de son savoir-faire et de son exigence. Pour accueillir les Jeux. Et évidemment pour y briller. »

With these Olympic Games, France intended to set a precedent throughout the world by designing a new benchmark for major international sporting events that were more socially and ecologically responsible. The elaboration of a *Charte Sociale Européenne pour les Événements Sportifs* (European Social Charter for Sports Events), presented on 15 November 2023 to the EU in Brussels, was part of this objective to deliver a model that can inspire future major events.

The State is also working with the International Olympic Committee, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to leave future editions a compilation of good practices based on four strong markers: “sober Games, committed Games, Games in the heart of the city and decentralised Games”⁵ (Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2024, 25–26).

In addition, since 2017, the Ministry of Sports and the Olympic and Paralympic Games has structured *la French Sport Touch* (the French Sport Touch) to strengthen French influence internationally and better coordinate stakeholders, including the Economic Interest Group “France Sport Expertise” and “Business France” (Ibid., 22).

The fact that the goals of the Games were, among other things, to “design a new Olympic and Paralympic reference”⁶, to “become a new standard for future major sporting events”⁷ as well as to “promote French know-how and heritage”⁸ and to “capitalise on the unprecedented media visibility to make an impression”⁹ speak for France betting on these Olympic Games to improve or reaffirm its position as a political leader on the global stage and to “honour its position as an exemplary nation in terms of ecological transition”.¹⁰

Regarding French sports diplomacy, the Paris 2024 Games were an opportunity to strengthen the cooperation between the Olympic Organising Committee and the

⁵ « Des Jeux sobres, des Jeux engagés, des Jeux au cœur de la ville et des Jeux décentralisés »

⁶ « Dessiner une nouvelle référence olympique et paralympique »

⁷ « Devenir un nouveau standard pour les futurs grands événements sportifs »

⁸ « Faire rayonner le savoir-faire et le patrimoine français »

⁹ « Capitaliser sur la visibilité médiatique inédite pour marquer les esprits »

¹⁰ « (Les Jeux) permettront à la France de faire honneur à sa position de Nation exemplaire en matière de transition écologique »

Agence française de développement (AFD) (French Development Agency), in order to use sport as a tool to achieve its sustainable development goals and the deepening of structural partnerships with countries such as Senegal. As well as the funding by the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of innovative projects around sport initiated by many embassies (Paris 2024 2023, 7).

The international legacy of the Games will live on through AFD's support for sports civil society and athletes' impact projects, in Africa and elsewhere, facilitating the access for all to sports infrastructure and encouraging investment in sport (Ibid.).

Additionally, the Olympic Games provided an opportunity to collaborate with the Olympic Solidarity programme, to explore partnership opportunities between the IOC, AFD and Public Development Banks in the context of the Finance in Common Summit (FICS) movement, and to continue collaborative efforts for the next Youth Olympic Games in Dakar 2026. Incidentally the AFD has lent 60 million euros to the Senegalese state (Ibid.).

For the AFD, Paris 2024 was a real accelerator of their action to deploy sport in the service of sustainable development. Forty-five projects have been financed in nineteen countries, all in Africa (Algeria, Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Morocco, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia), aimed at developing the practice of sport for those who are furthest from it and supporting them in their development (Paris 2024 2023, 14–17; 2024a, 60).

One of the objectives pursued by the French State with these Paris 2024 Games was therefore to put them at the service of France's attractiveness and economic and cultural influence. But also, to bring the diplomatic network closer to local sports authorities and the international sports movement, in particular the National Olympic Committees and the National Paralympic Committees as well as various governments, as illustrated by the Franco-Beninese partnership on the *Sport au féminin* (Women's Sport) project in Benin (Paris 2024 2023, 37–41).

While it is difficult to say if these projects were launched with the explicit goal of improving France's image abroad, it is notable that they allow France to keep a

position, stay involved in and strengthen the diplomatic ties with these African countries.

However, given France's historical context and long-lasting success in various sports, one could put forward the counter argument that the country's investments in sports and hosting of large events indicate a foundational commitment to sport as part of a national identity and cultural heritage rather than sportswashing. Moreover, the fostering of a positive international image, the promotion of national capacities and strengthening of diplomatic relations through the hosting of sports mega-events like the Olympic and Paralympic Games could be viewed as valid national objectives, countering the categorisation of sportswashing.

5.2 Opportunistic sportswashing

'Opportunistic sportswashing' was defined as the situational use of sports to momentarily deflect from controversies, to address domestic issues and to initiate changes, with the characteristics of being short-term and reactive.

5.2.1 Sport as a tool for deflection

Leading up to the Olympic Games, France was witnessing political unrest and instability domestically, triggered by the outcome of the 2024 European Parliament election which saw the far-right *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) arrive in first place with 31 per cent of the vote. This led to the decision by President Emmanuel Macron to dissolve the *Assemblée Générale* (National Assembly) and call for new legislative elections on 30 June and 7 July 2024.

These snap elections ended up with the left-wing coalition *Nouveau Front Populaire* (New Popular Front) winning the most seats in the National Assembly but not achieving a majority. Macron's Renaissance party being unable to form a majority in the *Assemblée*, a new Prime Minister needed to be appointed. The resignation of serving Prime Minister Gabriel Attal happened on 15 July 2024. However, Macron delayed the appointment of a new Prime Minister until after the Olympic Games (France 24 2024; Guilhamet 2024).

While it may be harsh to call this a deflection, it is undeniable that Paris 2024 was used to not address this domestic political controversy and to gain some time.

5.2.2 Sport as a tool for tackling domestic issues

The Government was aware that the Olympic and Paralympic Games were an opportunity for strong national mobilisation and were taken advantage of to create awareness for certain national problems.

The promotion of physical activity and sport as *Grande Cause Nationale 2024* (Great National Cause 2024) and the large-scale communication campaign *Bouge 30 minutes chaque jour!* (Move 30 minutes every day!) were thus launched with the specific aim of responding to a health emergency: sedentariness.

Inactivity and sedentary lifestyles, aggravated by screen addiction, have devastating health effects and are the cause of 9 per cent of deaths in France nowadays. 95 per cent of French adults are at health risk due to lack of physical activity or too much time spent sitting, and 66 per cent of teenagers face a worrying health risk due to the combination of too much inactivity and screen addiction (ANSES - Agence nationale de sécurité sanitaire de l'alimentation, de l'environnement et du travail 2022; 2020). These factors have led the French government to establish the following three objectives of the Great National Cause 2024: first, to put sport at the heart of public policies, interministerial cooperation and the Republican pact, second, to mobilise sports stakeholders and all the country's driving forces to promote the place of sport in France and third, to encourage the French people to move more and do more sport (Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2023, 5–6).

This national campaign and the commitment by the French state to disseminate the benefits of sport and regular movement to French society are also done with the aim of “building a sporting nation”.¹¹ Sport, its values and its benefits are being highlighted to improve the French population's health and lifestyle, but also with

¹¹ « Bâtir une nation sportive »

the aim of supporting “the evolution of France from a nation of great sportsmen to a great sporting nation”¹² (Ibid., 4).

This relates to the aspect of ‘opportunistic sportswashing’ where sport or sports events are used to address domestic issues.

5.2.3 Sport as a tool for large-scale societal changes

One aspect that the French government has repeatedly stressed is that the legacy of these Olympic and Paralympic Games is at least as important as the success of the event itself. The tangible and intangible heritage of the Games have been at the centre of the Paris 2024 project since 2015 and the start of the candidature stage. Hence, the Games should leave behind sustainable infrastructure for the future, environmental-friendly mobility solutions and a more inclusive and accessible society (Ministère des Sports et des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques 2024, 20–22; Paris 2024 2024c, 48–49).

The transformation and modernisation of existing infrastructures and the construction of some new ones, as well as the financing of sport equipment, are part of a development logic that will benefit all French territories and populations in the decades to come.

France is thus capitalising on the Games to accelerate the country’s transformations and to revitalise the territory with new infrastructure. The transformations target several areas: urban development, ecological transition, inclusion and accessibility as well as economy and employment.

Urban development

Each piece of infrastructure built or renovated as part of the Paris 2024 Games will be useful to the French people. The construction of infrastructure such as the Olympic Village and the Media Village will be converted into 2800 and 1300

¹²« L’évolution de la France d’une nation de grands sportifs vers une grande nation sportive »

housing and residential units respectively after the Games, more than 40 per cent of which will be used as social housing (Ministère de l'Economie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique 2023, 8).

The department of Seine-Saint-Denis is the beneficiary of the largest share of the material legacy of Paris 2024, with 80 per cent of public investment, i.e. €3 billion. The State and local authorities have deployed a very ambitious investment programme in terms of infrastructure, transport and sports facilities, including the Olympic village and the Olympic aquatic centre.

By building, renovating and making local public facilities accessible, the State aims to improve the living environment of the inhabitants. In Seine-Saint-Denis, for example, eighteen swimming pools have been built or renovated, which the general public, schoolchildren and sports clubs will enjoy after the Games (Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2024, 7–9; SOLIDEO - Société de livraison des ouvrages olympiques 2023, 12–17).

Overall, the Olympics and Paralympics were a tremendous push for transformation for the 131 municipalities as well as for the preservation and restoration of sports venues.

Ecological transition

The acceleration of the country's green transition was also part of the legacy of the Games. Many sports facilities have been renovated, with priority given to their thermal renovation to reduce their energy expenditure. Kilometres of cycle paths have been created, metro and tram lines have been extended, and several train stations have been renovated with the aim of developing and promoting the use of soft mobility. In addition, the French government has invested €700 million (out of €1.4 billion) alongside fourteen local authorities that have signed the *Plan Baignade 2018-2024* (2018-2024 Bathing plan) to make the Seine and Marne rivers swimmable (Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2024, 11–13).

Besides the use of 95 per cent of temporary or existing infrastructure, all competition venues were connected to the electricity grid instead of using temporary solutions often powered by fossil fuels (Ibid., 23).

However, even if a lot of efforts were made to organise more ecologically responsible Games, it should be noted that not everything was green about the “most Green Games”. In particular, the construction of the new judges’ tower for the surfing competitions in Tahiti, co-financed by the State with €2.2 million, received backlash as it involved the destruction of coral reefs raising concerns about the marine wildlife and the wave itself and resulting in local protests as well as a petition with 250,000 signatures against it (Augliere 2024; Hernandez 2024).

Inclusion and accessibility

Thanks to the first Paralympic Summer Games in France, the legacy also encompasses inclusivity and above all accessibility. The subject of disability was put at the centre of the public debate and the Games were a great accelerator for long-term transformations of public spaces by making them accessible in order to better welcome people with disabilities everywhere.

Thus, twenty-four metro stations have been made wheelchair accessible between 2017 and 2024 and in order to create an awareness for disabilities, more than 5 million students were invited to participate in the Olympic and Paralympic Week (Paris 2024 2024d, 6; 37; 45).

The Paralympic Games were placed under the sign of youth with the organisation of events in Paris to introduce young people to Paralympic sports (Paris 2024 2024b, 36; 43). The objective was to bring the Paralympic Games closer to an entire generation and to change how people look at disability (Paris 2024 2024d, 26; 33; 2024b, 4).

Paris 2024 also aimed to make these Games the first ISO¹³-certified event on the theme of universal accessibility (Paris 2024 2024d, 38; 2024b, 51).

¹³ International Organisation for Standardisation

The Paralympic Games have led to 1000 new para-welcoming clubs. Led by the *Comité paralympique sportif français* (CPSF) (French Paralympic Sports Committee) and with the support of the *Fédération française Handisport* (French Handisport Federation) and the *Fédération française du Sport Adapté* (French Federation of Adapted Sport), the sports clubs have benefited from specific training and have been encouraged to open Para sports sections within their clubs in order to remove the obstacles for people with disabilities to carry out a sporting activity (Paris 2024 2024d, 6; 42; 2024a, 59).

In the same dynamic of making sport accessible to all and leaving the inhabitants with 100 per cent accessible facilities and neighbourhoods, twenty local and public sports facilities were renovated and made accessible in Île-de-France. The most illustrative example of the material legacy that the Paralympic Games bring to the practice of sport for people with disabilities is the *Pôle de Référence Inclusif et Sportif Métropolitain* (PRISME) (Metropolitan Inclusive and Sports Reference Centre) with nearly 8000 square meters fully dedicated to Para sport (Paris 2024 2024d, 41).

The Paris 2024 Paralympic Games also received the most media coverage since the creation of the Paralympic Games, in line with the aim of creating a more tolerant and inclusive society (Paris 2024 2024d, 25).

However, the momentum to build a more inclusive society has also shown its limits with the eviction of large numbers of migrants and homeless people from Paris to surrounding areas and cities in the months leading up to the Games. For Olympic Games, placed under the slogan of being “wide open” and “for all”, these actions, labelled as “social cleansing” by activist groups stirred some controversy and faced heavy criticism (Janetsky 2024; Adamson 2024).

Economy and employment

The Games were also meant to boost the economy and employment sector. Paris 2024 was used as a major lever of attractiveness and a tremendous opportunity for economic development for the entire territory, particularly the Île-de-France region

and a total of 181,000 jobs were mobilised (Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2024, 26; Paris 2024 2024c, 49).

Many young people were trained and professionally integrated, and many small and medium-sized companies were included in the organisation of the Games. Not only have the Olympics provided labour, but they have also revived the economy affected by the Covid-19 crisis, particularly the tourism and hotel businesses. One goal pursued by France was to maintain its status as the world's leading tourist power (Ministère des Sports et des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques 2024, 8–9).

The inclusion of workers with disabilities was also one of the priority commitments of Paris 2024, made possible through various mechanisms that connected local organisers and integration and disability associations.

The *Agence virtuelle Emplois 2024* (Jobs 2024 Virtual Agency), shared with other major international sporting events organised in France, remains after the Games, and continues to enable unemployed people, and in particular people with disabilities, to find a job (Paris 2024 2024d, 39).

Regarding the many works done in urban planning, sustainability, accessibility and social policy, one can say that France used these Olympic Games to initiate changes in various domains, a feature of opportunistic sportswashing.

The Games have been a real accelerator for the realisation of many sports and cultural projects and major development and transport programs. They were an opportunity to carry out projects that would not have been launched or completed so quickly without this international competition (Paris 2024 2024a, 53). For example, the Olympic village construction would have taken more than fifteen years to finish in normal times and it was realized in six years (Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2024, 7).

Hosting the Games was the occasion for the country to renovate, develop and transform the Île-de-France region, a real force for accelerating public policies and a unique opportunity to support or bring about positive transformations for French society.

The acceleration of major infrastructure projects and the transformation of cities to make them more accessible and environmentally friendly relate to the situational use of sporting events.

However, the implementation of these projects and the launching of the campaigns could be considered the completion of public policy goals rather than diversionary tactics or opportunistic initiatives, disputing the classification of sportswashing. To distinguish whether they align with public policy objectives or are mainly diversionary, the factor of intent plays an important role. “With more interpretive and more contextualized inferences, researchers and data analysts can use content analysis to make judgements about intentions, needs, and potential actions” (Drisko and Maschi 2015b, 65–66). While the promotion of sporting activities for health benefits or the revival of urban areas could be seen as genuine public policy efforts and legitimate responses to a public health crisis, the initiatives intended to divert public attention from ongoing political scandals or challenges may more easily be classified as opportunistic sportswashing. Evidence of timing, such as the launching of projects right before large sports events can indicate a deflecting purpose.

What furthermore helps the distinction is an evaluation of the initiatives’ impacts. Projects which are planned to be sustainable and have durable effects, like years-long investments in sports infrastructure reflect public policy objectives whereas programmes which lead to no lasting change and only bring short-lived uses or benefits reflect strategies of opportunistic sportswashing.

Intent, timing and outcomes are thus critical factors to consider when discussing opportunistic sportswashing practices in comparison with public policy aspirations.

5.3 Target audience

The 2024 campaign and major national cause *Bouge 30 minutes chaque jour!* (Move 30 minutes every day!) aimed to promote all physical sports from an early age in order to build “a great sporting nation”. It promoted the benefits of physical activity to the general public but also targeted more specific audiences, in particular women, seniors, students and people with disabilities, who are the most remote

from the practice of sport. The campaign also aimed to promote sport in the workplace and targeted all those who could be ambassadors of this message, i.e. influencers, parents, doctors and teachers (Ministère des Sports, de la Jeunesse et de la Vie associative 2023, 3; 10; 12; Paris 2024 2024a, 55).

The French state has also launched several campaigns aimed solely at the French sports world. The national communication campaign on the Signal-Sports system at the beginning of 2024 aimed to strengthen the appropriation of this reporting tool by all athletes and their entourage, from the amateur to the highest level (Ministère des Sports et des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques 2023, 22).

Specific content was created for the France teams by the French Anti-Doping Agency, meant for the sports federations as well as the technical managers of the Ministry of Sport and the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the athletes. A specific campaign was launched to remind the French athletes of betting bans as well as an awareness campaign for the delegations on the prevention of attempts to manipulate sports competitions (Ibid., 22-23).

Aimed at a national as well as an international audience was the campaign to promote *l'Équipe de France Unifiée* (the Unified France Team). It was financed by the CNOSF¹⁴, the CPSF, the COJOP¹⁵ and the Government and launched in April 2024, 100 days before the Olympics. The announcements of the selected athletes, the monitoring of the performances during the final stages of preparation, the highlights of the France team, but also the profiles of French athletes were promoted on social networks and in the media (Ibid., 18).

The fact that the various press kits and campaigns are mainly aimed at the French population and not at an international audience supports the hypothesis of opportunistic sportswashing.

¹⁴ Comité National Olympique et Sportif Français (French National Olympic and Sports Committee)

¹⁵ Comité d'Organisation des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques de Paris 2024 (Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games)

The analysis has shown that the French sports strategy contains elements of systemic as well as opportunistic sportswashing. The main differences between the two types of sportswashing lie in their approach, duration and objectives.

The approach regarding the Paris Olympics and Paralympics was very much state-driven and institutionalised. The hosting was part of the country's efforts to remain an important player in the world and of a long-term investment strategy in sports and sports infrastructure. Hence, partly fulfilling the criteria of systemic sportswashing.

However, the French approach also contains a reactive and situational element to it as the hosting of the Games was taken advantage of to deflect from or not deal with short-term domestic political issues. Simultaneously, they were used to address a national health problem and initiate changes in many domains. Thus, the objectives of the French sports strategy mainly align with opportunistic sportswashing.

This leads to the conclusion that a third type may be needed to fully cover the use of sports and sports mega-events by democratic states. This 'hybrid sportswashing' is state-driven and strategic but besides aiming to enhance global influence, this type also uses mega-events to create long-term domestic benefits.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to fill the academic gap of the concept of sportswashing being applied to a democratic country, to understand French motivations for hosting large sports events as well as to contribute to scholarship and theory development on sportswashing.

In order to find an answer to the research questions (What are France's political and diplomatic motivations for hosting the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games? How do the French motivations and practices align with the features of 'systemic' and 'opportunistic' sportswashing?), I developed an analytical typology and conducted a descriptive case study as well as a qualitative content analysis.

In the first instance, the analysis has shown that the political and diplomatic motivations of France to host the Paris Olympics and Paralympics are multilayered. One motivation was to promote the country and showcase it from its best side by highlighting French know-how, competence, creativity and heritage. From that there was an intention to set a new global reference regarding more responsible sports mega-events.

Hosting the Games was also motivated by the will to deepen French diplomatic, economic and political ties with other countries across the Globe and the desire of improving or reaffirming France as a leading nation in the international system.

Another motivation was to create and raise awareness for the urgent need of improvement of the French population's health and lifestyles, combined with the ambition to capitalise on the Games to construct a "sporting nation".

Finally, a large motivation for the hosting of the 2024 Olympics and Paralympics was the opportunity to accelerate transformations, to launch programs and drive projects in multiple sectors across France.

In a second instance, the analysis has revealed that the French motivations and practices align with some criteria of systemic and opportunistic sportswashing. Fulfilling the features of being a long-term, state-driven strategy as well as being

temporarily used for deflection and the initiating of changes, the French sports strategy contains elements of both previously established types of sportswashing.

However, the strategic use of sport and large sporting events to achieve both short-term, opportunistic goals and long-term, systemic objectives could constitute a qualitatively distinct type labelled ‘hybrid sportswashing’.

Simultaneously addressing immediate, political, social or reputational controversies while being part of a long-term sports strategy of soft power, legitimacy and economic positioning, ‘hybrid sportswashing’ targets and engages both domestic and international audiences, adjusting the messages to the respective one.

This further category of sportswashing thus describes the integration of both systemic and opportunistic sportswashing into a coherent but flexible strategy.

The emergence of hybrid forms and presence in democracies shifts sportswashing from a concept critiquing autocracies to a global practice of reputational management. From the beginning, sportswashing was framed as an authoritarian tactic and put in relation with the covering up of human rights abuses and the deliberate use of sport to launder a state’s image.

The fact that similar logics of deflection, legitimation and branding can be observed in democracies leads to the conceptual evolution of sportswashing becoming less about regime type and more about strategic communication and soft power projection. In short, less focus on who does it but more on how, why and to what effect. Image, reputation and soft power have become vital for states in the modern international system and sport happens to be one of the few grounds left which offers global reach, emotional engagement and symbolic power all at once.

This thesis supports the consideration of sportswashing as an analytical or instrumentalist concept and encourages the adoption of a more nuanced approach to sportswashing in future research.

To test the usability of this newly developed typology of ‘systemic’ and ‘opportunistic’ sportswashing, further case studies on democratic and semi-democratic countries are required. Moreover, comparative studies of democratic host nations of large-scale sports events could deepen the understanding on

democracies' sportswashing engagement. The thesis' suggestion of 'hybrid sportswashing' opens a rich area for future research as further work is needed to define, refine and explore this distinct category.

Building on the case of France, future research could compare and/or expand on this thesis' findings on the 2024 Paris Olympics and Paralympics with previous or upcoming Olympic editions as well as other sports mega-events.

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