

José Luis Pérez Triviño\*

Universidad Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4567-6445>

Rafael Valencia Candalija\*\*

Universidad de Sevilla, Sevilla, Spain

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9274-6421>

## The thermometer of sporting nationalism

### Introduction

Sport and nationalism are probably two of the most exciting and passionate phenomena in the contemporary world, inspiring great reverence and devotion from fans so that members of the nation feel that being represented by the team on the field of football, rugby or cricket, constitutes a core element of their personal identity. They are known to be so intertwined that it is not uncommon to identify certain national sports as property of the country or find that they, in some way, represent the national character<sup>1</sup>. In the same vein, George Orwell said:

At the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare. But the significant thing is not the behaviour of the players but the attitude of the spectators: and, behind the spectators, of the nations who work themselves into furies over these absurd contests, and seriously believe – at any rate for short periods – that running, jumping and kicking a ball are tests of national virtue (Orwell, 1950).

That connection has not always been present in sport. The first Olympic Games were disputed for athletes wearing white suits because they do not represented their States. But from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most famous international sport events are led by states with a national substrate. The states use national federations, that are mostly private organizations, to show in the international arena their own identity. Countries utilize shields and emblems to symbolically identify and distinguish themselves as they did in the Middle Ages, when France took the cock to the stature of the heart, England, a rose. These coats of arms and emblems then act as a symbol of union that is hoisted

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<sup>1</sup> This is what the former British Prime Minister thought when he pointed to cricket as the quintessential game of the English nation (Bairner, 2001: xi) or Alan Sharpe, describing the experience of watching Scotland play football: “For a time before, throughout and after (the match) I have the feeling that my personal worth is bound up with Scotland’s success or failure” (Allison, 2000: 345).

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\* Correspondence address: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Roger de Llúria building (Ciutadella campus) Ramon Trias Fargas, 25-27 08005 Barcelona, Espana, e-mail: jose.perez@upf.edu.

\*\* Correspondence address: Campus Ramón y Cajal, C/ Enramadilla, 18-20, C.P: 41018 (SEVILLA), Espana, e-mail: rafavalencia@us.es.

amongst shouts of support in the stadiums. These fetish objects are considerably important in sport because they allow a partial object to be identified through and sometimes acts as a symbolic fetish (Brohm, 1982: 198).

The language of the media is a perfect reflection of the extent of nationalistic chauvinism with headlines that extol the virtues of patriotic athletes and personify the national teams with the feature itself, as happened over the course of several decades of 'the fury' with the Spanish national football team. Athletes in these competitions act as soldiers fighting in missions on foreign territory in defense of national interests<sup>2</sup>, which are represented by the victory hoisted high on the national flag<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, there are nations without states that are fighting for having a recognition by international federations or by the International Olympic Committee. One recent example of using national flags from people wanting a international recognition

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<sup>2</sup> The curious situation nowadays is that sport national federations call to foreign athletes to make their national teams more competitive. We can cite several examples in the national Spanish basketball and football teams. In football, there are examples, ranging from former Atlético de Madrid and Deportivo de la Coruña player Donato to La Roja's current forward, Diego Costa; not to forget the great Marcos Senna. All of these players are of Brazilian origin, but they ended up defending the colours of the Spanish national team. Key figures in basketball include the names of the Congolese Serge Ibaka or the Montenegrin Nikola Mirotic. Both were part of the great national team that dominated for years, both in the European Championships and in World Championships, not to mention the Olympic Games. However, if there is one particularly significant case, it is Mario Fernandes, a football player of Brazilian origin who has become a Russian citizen. A player who, years ago, when playing for Gremio de Porto Alegre, was linked with a move to some of the top European clubs, such as Real Madrid. He was called up to the Brazil national team, La Carinha, five-time world champions, although he never made his debut. A series of personal problems, including depression, nearly led to his retirement from the game, but he managed to recover and is currently one of the key players of the Russian team. In fact, it has been one of the main talking points of the host team in the 2018 World Cup. We wanted to dwell on the history of this player, since he represents the idea of the nationalized player (a soldier) performing his work (mission) on foreign soil. And so, Fernandes defends the colours of Russia in international championships. However, if we refer to the club where he truly belongs, it is CSKA Moscow (CSKA). Traditionally, CSKA has been known as The Club of the Army. In fact, until the collapse of the Iron Curtain, everyone considered CSKA not only as one of the most powerful sports teams, but also as an economic power: they could incorporate any player into their squad under the pretext that it was the players themselves that were actually called up. So much so that within sport their players were nicknamed 'the horses' since many of the players who usually joined CSKA, in addition to being footballers, were deployed in a military role as cavalry of the Russian Army. The cultural contrast between 'the samba' of Brazilian football and the rectitude of the military regime that affected the structure of Russian football is glaringly obvious. Even so, Fernandes proudly wears the shield of 'the Army Team' and the Russian flag on his chest.

<sup>3</sup> As Brohm points out: "Sport offers a considerable outlet for national identification. In effect, sport allows a great social body to identify with the symbolic sporting body of the nation" (Brohm, 1982: 196). In the context of the Cold War between Western capitalist countries and communists of Eastern Europe, the politicization of sport reached its peak. Athletes were turned into ambassadors and soldiers who defended not only their valour but also their country's ideology, political regime and way of life.

has been the use of *estelades* (Catalonian independentist flag) for FC Barcelona fans in international football matches<sup>4</sup>. They use them additionally as tool for nation building<sup>5</sup>.

In any case, sport has been used for foreign policy or to influence domestic policy goals (Tamburrini, 2000). Thus, our goal is not nationalism from a theoretical point of view; instead we will take sporting nationalism to be the set of measures in support of athletes, teams, or national teams, both by political authorities, as well as by the interests of a country. In the following, we will briefly analyze the relationship between nationalism and sport, focusing our attention not on whether (sports) nationalism is good but on analyzing its acceptability in terms of its external manifestations. Regarding this question, we will propose a thermometer that allows us to specify to a greater degree which of its expressions are tolerable and which are not.

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<sup>4</sup> With reference to the national identity that Catalonian fans want to assert, it must be recognized that in Spain it is possible to appreciate a phenomenon with a political background, which seems to be reflected in sport itself, specifically football. 'Autonomous teams' represent the three historical autonomous communities: Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia together with Andalusia. These three regions, due to the provisions set out in the Constitution of 1978, had access to autonomy faster and enjoyed a higher level of competence than other regions. On certain dates, when there is a break in domestic competitions, these teams often arrange friendly matches with international teams. These fixtures often add fuel to the political cause, mainly in matches involving the regional teams of Catalonia and the Basque Country. However, until recent years, in these meetings of these 'autonomous teams', there was no claim for them to be recognized as international associations like, until recently, territories like Kosovo have done. Things have changed since 2014 approximately with the raise of independence wave in a big part of Catalonian society, being the case that in many matches the majority of FC Barcelona fans in the Camp Nou have made public expressions of independency. Having declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, the Republic of Kosovo has not yet been recognized by all the States of the United Nations. This lack of consensus in international politics has been mirrored in the field of sport. In fact, in the final stage of the process of admitting Kosovo to international sports organizations, such as UEFA, Serbia, already a member of those organizations, for obvious reasons, offered more resistance. Thus, in 2016, the President of the Football Federation of Serbia, Tomislav Karadzic reiterated that his country would never vote in favour of admitting Kosovo into UEFA. To that end, he said that Kosovo represented a political and not a football proposal. Among his arguments were: "It is a political proposal and not football. I'm defending football from politics". To this he added "football should not change the borders of a country" (EFE: <https://www.efc.com/efe/english/sports/kosovo-accepted-as-uefa-member/50000266-2915196>), undoubtedly referring to the independence of Serbia declared by Kosovo in 2008, which Serbia still refuses to recognize.

Federative tensions aside, the truth is that, after Kosovo was recognized as a member of the IOC in 2014, it shortly after joined UEFA and FIFA in 2016. Since then, Kosovo has ceased to play only friendly matches, but it can now play official matches. Not in vain, they have joined the UEFA Nations League. It is a process that, as we will see later, has been supported by football players born in Kosovo, or even descendants of those born there. They are in solidarity with the cause that, since the 1990s, set out the political movements which longed for the separation of Serbia.

<sup>5</sup> Neither is it uncommon for sport to be used to foster or increase cohesive internal resistance, or to shore up the government in moments of difficulty or crisis. There is no shortage of examples: Argentina during the 1978 World Cup, or the rise of Eastern European countries in sport as a propaganda mechanism abroad. Even more: there was a football match which started the war between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969. There are more cases in which it would be more reasonable to infer that national sport had helped a nationalist cause than that it has hindered or made no difference at all (Allison, 2000: 352).

## Is sporting nationalism good?

The vision of the relationship between nationalism and sport will depend on the previously established judgment on nationalism and on sport itself. Examining the issues between sport and nationalism requires previously establishing the significance of the term nationalism and, in this way, clarifying the influential relationships between both variables.

It is not easy to clearly delineate the concept of nationalism, nor does there exist an unanimous valuation of it: “Nation and the concepts derived from it are among the most shifting and elusive in the entire study of society, not least because they arouse so much emotion” (Allison, 2000: 349). In effect, the traits that define this phenomenon are far from being clarified. In spite of mentioning characteristics like language, culture, religion and traditions, it is clear that it has not been possible to establish one convincing way of identifying a nation. On the other hand, there is no one unique way of manifesting ‘nationalism’; its defenders sometimes speak of political and cultural nationalism (Margalit, 1997: 115), or of conservative, liberal, atavistic, modern, exclusionary, resistance nationalism and so on (Feinberg, 1997: 105). Those who defend the virtues of nationalism appeal to the fact that nationalism satisfies the profound need of human beings to belong to a society that allows them to form a complete life. This was the principle argument of Johann Gottfried Herder. Nowadays, it is Charles Taylor who highlights, on the one hand, that a relationship should not be established between nationalism and atavism: “Nationalism, I have wanted to say, can’t be understood as an atavistic reaction. It is a quintessentially modern phenomenon” (Taylor, 1997: 43).

On the other hand, he argues that nationalism constitutes a legitimate reaction in the face of threats to dignity:

I am trying to identify the source of the modern nationalism turn, the refusal – at first among elites – of incorporation by the metropolitan culture, as a recognition of the need for difference but felt existentially as a challenge, not just as a matter of valuable common good to be created but also viscerally as a matter of dignity, in which one’s self-worth is engaged. This is what gives nationalism its emotive power, This is what places it so frequently in the register of pride and humiliation (Taylor, 1997: 45).

In effect, nationalism creates clearly favourable conditions for some virtues such as loyalty, compromise and personal sacrifice. Consequently, these authors do not consider it necessarily as something negative that a partial attitude faced with opposing interests of people or collectives from nationalism is derived. For Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 1984), patriotism establishes how one should act according to the majority conceptions of the good life in the society where an individual lives, independently of whether that leads to committing unjust actions against other nations. From more moderate perspectives, it is held that when it is not possible to accommodate the inter-

ests of two nations that are in conflict over a matter, then national interests shall have the right to choose their own path.

Nevertheless, there are less optimistic perspectives about the presumed virtues of nationalism. Walter Feinberg (Feinberg, 1997) points out that nationalism acts as a partially moral perspective since it leads individuals to have more favourable, if not clearly discriminatory, attitudes, to their fellow citizens than to citizens of other nations.

The rise of nationalism involves the development of a specific form of collective identity, one that is seen to originate in a shared language, culture and historical experience. People who express particular nationalist sentiments usually hold that they are obliged to favour fellow countrymen and that their nation has a right to recognition by others. This recognition entails, among other things, acceptance by outsiders of the special moral obligation that people within the nation have to support one another (Feinberg, 1997: 66). Historically sports national teams have tried to reflect that essential traits<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, nationalism assumes that it is correct to make all those decisions or actions that favour a sense of belonging of the members of a national community (McMahan, 1997: 161). Bolstering a collective identity is something that is correct, in spite of the fact that it can occasionally entail disregarding the interests of other individuals or groups inserted in the same community, as well as the interests of other different communities or nations. In addition to that, the demand for loyalty to the group is also characteristic of nationalism. In this sense, nationalism is opposed to universalism, seen as a concept that considers individuals should be treated in a certain way, independent from their belonging to a certain nation. In short, within the field of sport, nationalism involves granting favourable treatment to athletes of one's own nation.

From a leftist point of view, the politicization of sport and specifically the establishment of competition between nations, in the emblematic manner of the Olympic Games, leads states to consolidate their national identity or improve their national prestige in the

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<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless the current plural composition of societies make this difficult. This issue relates to the controversies which have been raised by certain sectors in some countries, where some athletes have been criticized, while competing for their national teams, for not sharing the symbols and ideals of patriotism of the country. Well known are the criticisms surrounding Karim Benzema, when he played for France, and Mesut Özil, in Germany, who chose not to sing the national anthem before matches. In the case of the Turkish-born German international doubts about his national sentiment have surfaced more strongly prior to the last World Cup in Russia. The main cause of all of them was a photo that was taken of his meeting with the Turkish president Erdogan in London, in the middle of a full electoral campaign for the presidential elections in Turkey. This provoked an extensive amount of criticism towards the player, demanding in most cases his expulsion from the national team. The situation ended with a strong letter from the Arsenal midfielder, hinting at possible cases of racism from the German Football Federation (DFB) and its president, Reinhard Grindel, where he listed a series of events that made him retire from the German team. Among them, it is worth highlighting an argument which has been shared by other players like Benzema or the Belgian Romelu Lukaku, who claim to be recognized as nationals when their respective national teams win and as immigrants when the national team obtains negative results (Valencia, 2018: 27-30).

concert of countries. In effect, the great international sporting events are the occasion for governments of most countries to take action in order to increase nationalist fervour.

Other authors have unmasked the negative face of nationalism due to the fact that it is a powerfully dangerous force. For example, Isaiah Berlin warns that besides having valuable aspects, political nationalism leads to thinking that others are 'inferior' by nature. In this sense, the psychological feeling of national superiority puts nationalism on a continuum whose extreme is fascism. As Berlin says: "If Fascism is the extreme expression of this attitude, all nationalism is infected by it to some degree" (Berlin quoted by Margalit, 1997: 85).

Claudio Tamburrini points in a similar direction when he notes:

Thus MacIntyre's version of patriotism is deplorable simply because it sanctions conducts that are harmful to other people based on irrelevant foundations. The fact that a group of people do not belong to our community cannot be a reason to justify harming them. This critique also affects Nathanson's modified patriotic position (Tamburrini, 2000: 93).

Linked to these theoretical objections, other authors have highlighted the connection between nationalism, violence and bad sporting practice. One of the principle critiques on nationalism and its expression in sport is that it can generate tension amongst competing athletes and fans from different countries, and even promote outbreaks of violence.

Along these lines, Nicholas Dixon (Dixon, 2000) points to sporting nationalism as something that often contributes to fans of a national team (or individuals on a national team) acting in unsportsmanlike ways to the detriment of rival athletes and it can, on occasions foster violence<sup>7</sup>:

<sup>7</sup> One of the most recent examples was what happened during the last World Cup in Russia in 2018 where we could see that conflicts such as the Balkans are still alive and most worryingly; that football is still used as a setting for political contests that are very far from the values of sport. In the first place, we can cite the goal celebrations in Switzerland's victory over Serbia by Xherdan Shaqiri and Granit Xhaka, who play for the Swiss national team, but who do not deny their Kosovan origin. Both players, after scoring, celebrated by making a gesture symbolizing the double-headed eagle of the Albanian flag on their chest in front of the Serbian fans.

The survival of the Kosovo War was certified, motivated by those who, still today, continue to proclaim the independence of this region of Serbia and its inclusion in the so-called Greater Albania. Certain territories are said to belong to this region, such as those of the northwest of Greece, the Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia; Albanian nationalists have claimed them as their own, at various times, since its independence from the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan War in 1912 and 1913. In fact, in October 2014 in a match between Serbia and Albania, we relived these moments: a flag of Greater Albania was hung from a drone, as it flew by and eventually landed on the pitch until the Serbian Mitrovic destroyed it, which, in turn, caused a brawl between players causing the game to be suspended and several were sanctioned by the UEFA (Valencia, 2018: 42).

Serbia's game against Switzerland was not the only altercation the nation was involved in Russia. We cannot ignore the issue of a photograph published by the tennis player Novak Djokovic, where he was captured posing with Ivan Perisic, Mateo Kovacic, Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic in support of Croatia ahead of their final with France. More than twenty years after the end of the war, the photo between a Serbian tennis star and Croatian footballers may well be a sufficient example of the bond between representatives of these two countries, who in recent years have clashed as opposing sides in a fierce battle. Unfortunately, it was not perceived in this way, but on the contrary, it only served as a tool for users on social networks to stage the struggles of years ago, returning to football mismatches different from those of the playing fields (Valencia, 2018: 46).

A tiny minority of English soccer fans sometimes rampage through foreign cities where the national team is playing, destroying property and attacking opposing fans. Even when no physical violence occurs, racial and ethnic abuse of players for rival nations teams is an all-too-common excess of nationalism. And chauvinistic fans can deliberately or inadvertently interfere with the performance of athletes from other countries, for instance by yelling as a player is about to serve a tennis ball or it a putt, or – as happened during the 1996 Olympics held in Atlanta – inappropriately chanting support for the United States team during the routines of foreign gymnast. What all of these instances of inappropriate, excessive patriotism have in common is a simple lack of moral regard for athletes coaches and other people from rival countries (Dixon, 2000: 75).

There have been several counter critiques to these objections linking sporting nationalism and violence. In the first place, sport rivalry that leads to bad practices and violence between the athletes themselves and the fans is not exclusive to nationalist confrontations. Rather this happens quite frequently at the domestic level. It is clear that the level of sport rivalry has, on many occasions, been of a greater degree between non-national teams, but rather ones that represent a city or a region. In some cases, such rivalries have been so histrionic, or worse, and equally dangerous, as those that that spring from international enemies, given that age-old hatred has generated and deepened between different (opposing) fans. The tensions between opposing teams may be of differing types: cultural, historical, political or territorial reasons. It is almost unnecessary to point out the rivalry in the football arena between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona for political-territorial reasons, even between teams of the same city: FC Barcelona–RCE Espanyol, AC Milan–Inter, Manchester City–Manchester United, etc. Also well-known is the rivalry between the *barrasbravas* (hooligans) in Argentine club football in general, especially those of Boca and River (in 2008, there were 38 injuries during the Argentine football season). Others are political-classist type conflicts, such as those that take place in Israel between the so-called *Hapoel* (meaning “worker”) teams, since these usually come from labour unions. Facing these working class teams are the *Beitar* teams which are closer to the political right (Reguera, 2008: 82). Other variations that have given rise to greater passion and violence have been the opposition that may occur between teams linked to a certain religion. Perhaps the most well-known examples are matches between the Scottish teams Catholic Celtic and Protestant Glasgow Rangers.

Secondly, it has also been pointed out that sport in general, and more precisely the national representation of athletes and sport teams, plays a primordial role as an escape valve for more extreme nationalistic attitudes and sentiments. It is obvious that it would be preferable that those sentiments against other nations did not exist, but we live in a world where national hatred does still exist. From a realistic point of view, sport serves as an escape valve for the bellicose passions that could have nefarious consequences if there were no other way to express these feelings. In this way, during a match or a competition, fans have the ‘freedom’ or even the ‘right’ to unleash prejudices and hostility on athletes and fans from other countries and to then return to everyday routines after letting go of these bellicose passions. It is preferable then, that manifestations of pub-

lic disorder or violence take place in closed and controlled places like stadiums. It is also better that they do not happen suddenly, or that they are become difficult to control (Tamburrini, 2000).

But perhaps the main counter-criticism lies in that the phenomena mentioned above which may seem to be caused by sporting nationalism, but may be caused by other, deeper factors. That is, the cause of undesirable behaviour and violence that is manifested in stadiums does not have its roots in sport itself or in national teams, but in other factors like poverty, marginalization, social oppression or in the festering of past nationalistic insults. For all these reasons, it would be unfair to attribute the cause of violence or the bellicose nature of fans to sporting nationalism.

Even though the counterarguments are quite solid, there still remains a question regarding the legitimacy of sporting nationalism. Perhaps the focus in analyzing this link between two variables should not be from the perspective that the former causes the latter, but rather if the former contributes to the expression of the latter. In any case, an analysis case by case seems a better option, but we need a thermometer.

### **The thermometer of sporting nationalism: assertive, aggressive and violent nationalism**

In this sense, it would be possible to establish a type of sporting nationalism 'thermometer', according to which the degree that it contributes to vandalism, violence or bad sport practice is observed. Importing a distinction made by Jim Parry (1998: 207), regarding the adjacent topic of violence in sport, among assertive, aggressive and violent behaviours themselves, in the same way a classification of sporting nationalism can be made according to three degrees<sup>8</sup>. Before elaborating on this classification, we will foreshadow our eventual critique, warning that it is a vaguely limited classification since it will not be easy, in some cases, to distinguish between aggressive and violent behaviour, such as the case of inciting hatred, which a media outlet may perform against a rival.

Assertive sporting nationalism would correspond to a society in whose actions there is a positive sense of affirmation or insistence on individuals' rights, or even the protection and vindication of the collective identity itself. It seems clear that there is no moral reproach for this type of nationalistic expression which attempts to reaffirm the sense of community without necessarily confronting rivals. Said another way, this nationalistic expression constructs its own identity without seriously undermining that of other communities. Those nationalist manifestations that often occur in international competitions where fans demonstrate in support of their national team, highlighting certain values or virtues, but without questioning or attacking those of rivals would be clear expressions of assertive nationalism. Aggressive sporting nationalism comprises behaviour that implies some degree of force and some type of vigorous, offensive and active attitude; that of striking first. As Parry (Parry, 1998) himself points out referring to actions



in sport, its moral acceptability may depend on the context. In the competitive sport arena, aggression is largely accepted, but it does not seem clear if this should be the case in other non-sport environments. Aggression in sport nationalism is not physically expressed; rather it tends to be seen in verbal, psychological, economic or other types of manifestations against other nations. This is often the case when two rival nations with historical roots of enmity meet in a sporting match: the respective fans often shout at each other, insulting or singing offensive chants. While a variety of behaviours could fit the definition, some of them are clearly unacceptable, such as, for example, disdain and humiliating a player or the society (or nation) of a rival team, or provoking errors in their performance instead of cheering on one's own team. If this were the case, the country, whether it is the government or the fans, would be demonstrating unjustified aggressive sporting nationalism, and for that reason, could be censured. In contrast, an example of aggressive behaviour that would not necessarily be reproachable is the case of a state investing effort and money in improving the quality of its national teams in order to obtain better future results, as long as it is not an exaggerated investment that stopped the state from fulfilling its more relevant social objectives.

Lastly, violent sporting nationalism would involve the intention to physically harm another country. If violence in sport paradigmatically involves inflicting some physical injury on the rise, in the realm of nationalism, it would imply an intentional act by a country (government or fans) that is part of a chain reaction, resulting in the physical injury of athletes, fans or good of another country. Of course, this characterization suffers from a certain degree of indeterminacy, which makes it quite difficult to prove when a government or fan has acted violently towards a rival country; a difficulty that would render it virtually impossible to define and recognize after the fact because the actions that have produced harm were premeditated, a topic that a virtual deluge of material has been written about in criminal law. But this does not render it impossible that there may be clear cases.

## Conclusions

In sum, having examined the pros and cons of sporting nationalism in terms of foreign policy, it seems to us that there are not sufficient reasons to establish a causal link or to claim that it contributes to violence. It follows that there do not seem to us to be any moral or political reasons to eliminate international competitions or to even substantially change their current structure. Neither should sporting nationalism be perceived to have provoked a considerable increase in non-sportsman-like behaviour in competitions, if these are compared to the behaviour in domestic competitions. Nevertheless, this conclusion is conditional on the assumption that the degree of sporting nationalism manifested between states will continue at current levels. If an increase in violence

or in unsportsmanlike practice, as a result of sporting nationalism, is observed, there may be reason to reopen this debate.

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## Abstract

The connection between sport and nationalism is unquestionable. However, it is a matter of debate whether and to what extent this should be the case, given the potential danger involved. Cases of chauvinist exacerbation and even violence are well known. From a normative philosophical approach, we start with the hypothesis of a thermometer of sports nationalism that allows us to evaluate when these expressions are tolerable or not. As a proposal, we distinguish between assertive, aggressive and violent nationalism. Having examined the pros and cons of sporting nationalism in terms of foreign policy, it seems to us that there are not sufficient reasons to establish a causal link or to claim that it contributes to violence. It follows that there do not seem to us to be any moral or political reasons to eliminate international competitions or to even substantially change their current structure.

**Keywords:** nationalism, sport, violence, aggression

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