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László Marácz[1]

Sports and the Identity of Ethnies: the Case of Basque and Frisian

Abstract
Full-fledged nations have had, and continue to have, the possibility to strengthen their national identity by participating in international sports competitions, such as the Olympic Games, and can use positive results in the international sports arena for national self-assertion. Globalization has opened up even more possibilities for nations to participate in international competitions. Ethnic and national minorities, classified as ethnies in the sense of Smith (see references), are excluded from these possibilities. Athletes and teams of ethnic and national minorities can only participate in international competitions if they join the sports ranks of the majority nation. However, another strategy is observed among ethnic and national minorities in order to make use of sports as a tool of soft power to strengthen internal cohesion and to team up with international sports organizations, like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF). It turns out that among ethnic and national minorities, unique sports are to be found that form a substantial attribute of their identities. In this paper, this sports strategy of ethnies will be illustrated with two case studies, namely autochthonous sports that have originated from the Basque minorities in Spain and France and the Frisian minority in the Netherlands.
Keywords: sports, ethnic and national minorities, ethnie, Basque sports, Frisian sports, soft power, globalization

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Introduction

In this paper, we will take a closer look at how sports are used as a tool of soft power by ethnic and national minorities to strengthen collective identity and international prestige. The paper discusses two case studies, namely sports in the Basque Country and the Dutch province of Fryslân. Before examining these case studies, we will first discuss the conceptual toolbox, which

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will enable us to conduct a deeper analysis. In the following section, we will discuss the definition of sports, the status of ethnic and national minorities compared to nations in the context of sports, and sports as a tool of soft power within the framework of globalization.

Concepts

Let us first consider the definition of 'sports'. Undoubtedly, everyone has, to a certain extent, an idea of what a sport actually is. Football and tennis, for example, are activities that can quite certainly be regarded as sports. However, activities such as darts or chess are much more often subject to debate about whether these activities should be regarded as sports. Given these different activities that are subject to debate, a clear definition of the concept of 'sports' must be given. Two definitions of sports are put forward by international organizations operating on the international and supranational levels of global sports governance. The Council of Europe has elaborated a European Sports Charter, which includes a definition in Article 2/1a of the document.[2] According to this definition, sports are "all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels." Another definition is put forward by the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF). The GAISF is the umbrella organization for all (Olympic and non-Olympic) international sports federations as well as the organizer of multi-sports games and sport-related international associations. It has 97 full members, including international sports federations governing specific sports disciplines worldwide; thirteen associate members, including organizations that conduct activities closely related to the international sports federations; and eleven international federations that have observer status at the GAISF.[3] According to the GAISF, an activity can be regarded as a sport when there is a certain element of competition present, there is no element of 'luck' involved, there is no equipment monopoly, and the activity ought not to be harmful to the participants.[4] In both definitions, the competition aspect of sports plays a defining role.

Now that the definition for the concept of 'sports' is clarified, the concept of the 'nation' will be discussed. The concept of the 'nation' is rather vague and controversial, and thus many different scholars have put forward many different definitions over the years.[5] In this paper, we will follow the definitions of 'nation' and 'ethnie' as put forward in the work of Smith. In Smith (2005: 13), the concept of 'nation' is defined as "a named human community occupying a homeland, and having common myths and a shared history, a common public culture, a single

2 See for "The Revised European Sports Charter" the website of the Council of Europe. https://rm.coe.int/16804c9dbb. Accessed: January 26, 2023.

3 See for the members of GAISF: https://gaisf.sport/members/. Accessed 2023, January 26.

4 See for this definition the website of World Lacrosse. https://worldlacrosse.sport/about/gaisf/. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

5 See for the discussion of 'nation' and related concepts Weber (1978: 385-389); Deutsch (1966); Smith (1988, 1991, 1999, 2005); Anderson (1992); Gat (2013); and Leerssen (2018).

economy, and common rights and duties for all members." According to Smith (2005: 13), there are key differences between the concept of 'nation' and the concept of 'ethnie', which he defines as "a named human community connected to a homeland, possessing common myths of ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of shared culture, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites." Relevant for the present discussion is that ethnic and national minorities fall under the definition of 'ethnie', and that the definition of nation is irrelevant in this respect.

The status of 'nation' or 'ethnie' has enormous consequences for participation in international competitions, as Hobsbawm (1997: 142-143) points out. According to Hobsbawm, only nations can participate in international sports competitions, like World Cups or Olympic Games. In these international competitions, the nations are symbolically represented by an individual athlete or team. These athletes serve as a tool of nation-formation and express the competitive self-assertion of the national community. Elsewhere, I have argued that Hungary invested heavily in their national sports, such as saber fencing, to compensate for the loss of national prestige during and after the First World War. These efforts led to a domination of Olympic fencing by the Hungarians for a large part of the twentieth century (Marácz, 2019).

In modern times, the fact that the 'nation' is an actor in the international sports arena also makes it a vehicle of soft power in globalization, as Nye (2004) argues. The Soviet Union put a lot of effort into sports to beat Team USA in the Olympic medal ranking during the Cold War (Nye, 2004: 74), and China wanted to demonstrate its readiness to participate in globalization by organizing the Olympic Summer Games of 2008 (Nye, 2004: 88). However, in processes of globalization, not only nations or hegemonic states can play an important role and make use of soft power for distributing values worldwide; popular sport clubs or teams can also play a role in communicating values. Competitions in the US, like national basketball games, Major League Baseball games, the National Football League's Super Bowl, and the National Ice Hockey League, project the idea that anyone who participates in sports can become famous and rich (Nye, 2004: 47). The most popular sports team in the world is, however, a European sports team, i.e., Manchester United, with 200 fan clubs in 24 countries (Nye, 2004: 40). This shows that the globalization of sports can be influenced by smaller, non-US entities as well.

Although ethnies, including ethnic and national minorities as defined by Smith above, do not directly play a role in international competitions reserved for nations, they can employ globalization to be present at the international or supranational level of global sports governance and sports networks. This is done in order to strengthen internal cohesion, community consciousness, and to gain international recognition for their cause. Let us consider two of these cases, i.e., Basque and Frisian sports, respectively.

Basque Sports

The Basques have lived for a long period in the southern part of France in a continuous strip with their co-nationals in the northern part of Spain. [6] In both countries, they have the status of ethnic and national minorities, although in the Spanish part of the Basque Country, the Basque communities enjoy autonomy within the framework of a federated Spanish state. Basque nationalism did not succeed in guaranteeing a separate state for the Basque nation; rather, the Basques are considered an ethnie in the sense of Smith, as discussed above.[7] The Basque language plays an important role in securing the Basque identity, as it differs substantially from the Romance languages of French and Spanish (Smith, 1988: 27-28). The Basques have managed to revitalize their ethnic identity, in which sports play a prominent role as an identity marker (Smith, 1999: 138).

Abrisketa (2012) discusses a Basque sport, i.e., 'pelota' (ball game), which is primarily played in the Basque Country. The book also provides details of the history of Basque pelota and the role it plays in Basque culture. The essence of the ball game is about hitting a ball against a wall (frontón in Basque), and when the ball you have hit bounces more than once or bounces out of play, you score a point.[8] The most popular version of the sport involves two individuals competing against each other and playing with their bare hands. However, many different varieties of the sport exist. Pelota can also be played in pairs and with different materials, such as wooden rackets or basket-like gloves called 'xisteras' in Basque.

From a historical perspective, pelota has indeed been part of Basque identity for many centuries. The oldest document in which pelota is mentioned dates all the way back to 1509. It is an ordinance from the municipality of Bilbao prohibiting the game of pelota from being played in the cemetery of the Santiago church. In the early days of the sport, before the introduction of the frontón, pelota was predominantly played against walls of churches. Another document that traces all the way back to the sixteenth century is a description of the Basque Country by Johannes Lange. In his description of Basque identity from 1526, Lange mentions the play of the tambourine, the uniqueness of their language, and the game of pelota as typical Basque characteristics. Pelota even plays a role in local Basque legends (Abrisketa, 2012: 37-38). According to one of these Basque legends, ancient giants used to play pelota with colossal rocks in the Basque countryside. In our day and age, these colossal rocks can be found across the mountainous Basque countryside, representing the leftovers of these ancient giants playing pelota. Besides these ancient legends, former pelota players throughout history have become legends themselves as well. Well-known examples of such pelota players are Perkain and Azantza.[9]

6 See Deutsch (1966: 42) for a linguistic map of the Basque territories.
7 See for an extensive discussion of the history of Basque nationalism Seton-Watson (1977: 56-59).
8 See for the basics of Basque pelota the website of Fitpeople: https://fitpeople.com/sports/others-sports/the-basics-of-basque-pelota/. Accessed: 2022, January 26.
9 Ibid., 51-53.

Perkain was a renowned pelota player from the French side of the Basque Country. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, he was forced to live in exile and thus moved to the Spanish side of the border. When one day he was invited to play a match in a Basque town on the French side of the border, Perkain surprisingly accepted the offer. According to the legend, during this particular match, the police arrived to arrest him. Perkain subsequently knocked the officers down by precisely hitting them with his pelota balls, and he could thus miraculously escape to the Spanish side of the border again. The Azantza legend is less subject to historical controversy. Azantza was a pelota player from the higher ranks of society who played during the nineteenth century. Azantza never minded playing against players from other classes. Many upper-class friends of his criticized him for playing with men from lower classes, but according to Azantza, on the frontón, social ranks and classes did not matter; the only thing that mattered was the quality of the players. Until this day and age, this mentality is still very much present on the pelota court, and Azantza is highly appreciated for this.

Pelota is also related to the Basque identity due to the frontón. The frontón itself is much more than merely the court on which pelota is played. In most Basque cities and towns, the frontón stands literally in the center of the community, as it is often located close to or next to the town's central square. In some towns and villages, the pelota court even functions as the central square. In these cases, the frontón is not only the place where pelota is played, but also the place where the community comes together on various occasions besides pelota matches. One could think of local dance festivals or markets being organized on the frontón. Hence, the frontón plays a prominent role in Basque community formation. Besides this function, the pelota court is also used to deliver messages. Over the last decades, an increasing number of pelota matches have been broadcasted on television, and many advertisers eagerly try to make use of this opportunity. During important matches, the left-hand wall is more than often decorated with a great number of advertisements. In this way, commercialization has reached the pelota court. Switching our focus from the professional courts to the street courts, local courts are often used by political activists for Basque independence to express their political and national ideals. It is not uncommon to come across the slogan "Iraulza ala hil", which translates to "Revolution or death" (Abrisketa, 2012: 333-346; Woodworth, 2007: 101-102). In sum, the frontón plays a prominent role in Basque society, as it is much more than merely the court on which pelota is played. It is the place where communities come together, where advertisers unobtrusively try to persuade the Basque audiences to buy their goods, and where Basque political activists manifest their extreme nationalist ideas. Hence, we conclude that the frontón is an inherent attribute of Basque community life.

The fact that pelota and its court, the frontón, play a central role in Basque community life is also emphasized in an interview with two professional Basque pelota players, namely Julen Martija Ollakarizketa, the current Basque pelota champion, and Erik Jaka, the pelota champion of 2020.[10] Ollakarizketa confirms that pelota is "very important to the Basque culture" and that "the sport really is a sport from the Basque Country." For Jaka, the fact of a "national"

10 I am indebted to Remko Munnik for conducting these interviews. The interviews were compiled online on May 6, 2022.

pelota competition provides strong support for the Basque identity: "The fact that during the competition, you travel around the Basque Country to play your matches and, as a result, you get to know different people and different towns and cities throughout the region strongly contributes to the sense of belonging to the Basque community." Both interviewees also emphasize that besides this sense of belonging to a community, there are also certain values present in pelota that accordingly represent Basque society at large, namely nobility and honesty. "It is expected from pelota players that they play the game honestly at all times. This aspect of the sport can be related to a saying well known throughout Spain and Latin America: 'La palabra de Vasco,' which would translate to 'The word of a Basque.' This saying stands for absolute honesty. When you give someone 'The word of a Basque,' it means your word is bond against all costs. Another aspect present in the game of pelota and that of Basque society at large is that of ingenuity. When playing pelota, one's goal is to play the ball where your opponent least expects it in order to fool him and score a point. This characteristic is also present in the Basque style of conversating and negotiating, as Basques can come up with proposals where you least expect them."

The previously presented data on pelota and the Basque Country demonstrate that pelota is a sport under the definitions of the Council of Europe and GAISF, in which not only the competition element, evidenced by the existence of a national pelota competition, is satisfied but it also clearly contributes to physical fitness and social relationships, such as a common Basque public culture. The fact that pelota is considered a sport is also supported by the International Federation of Basque Pelota (FIPV) which is recognized by the IOC and is a member of the GAISF.[11] Hence, this Basque sport is a significant attribute of the Basque ethnie. This is also underlined by the following anecdote that recently occurred in the Spanish parliament Abrisketa (2012: 370). A Spanish member of parliament was referring to his four colleague politicians from the Basque Country by stating: "I don't know what those four pelotaris want." Here, the Spanish politician referred to his Basque colleagues as 'pelotaris,' i.e., pelota players.

The times when Basque pelota was played only by members of the Basque diaspora in the Americas are long gone (Totoricagüena, 2005: 199). The Basque ethnie has managed to promote Basque pelota at the international and supranational levels of global sports governance by establishing the FIPV, which is now a federative organization with 33 member countries all over the world. The FIPV, which organizes world championships in Basque pelota, has been a member of GAISF since 1929. Basque pelota has also enjoyed the attention of the IOC, having been a demonstration sport at four Olympic Summer Games: Paris (1900, 1924), Mexico City (1968), and Barcelona (1992). These successes in promoting Basque pelota at the international and supranational level of global sports governance contribute to the self-assertion of the Basque ethnie. In the following section, we will discuss Frisian sports.

11 See for more details the website of the International Federation of Basque Pelota on the list of members of GAISF. https://gaisf.sport/members/#pelota. Accessed: 2023, January 26.

Frisian Sports

The Frisian ethnic and national minority lives in the northern parts of the Netherlands, particularly in the province of Fryslân (in Dutch, Friesland). The province is officially bilingual, with both Dutch and Frisian being recognized languages. Frisian is the official second-state language in the Netherlands. Of the 600,000 inhabitants of the province of Fryslân, around 200,000 speak the Frisian language as their native language. The rest of the inhabitants speak either Dutch or mixed, hybrid, or co-switched variants of Frisian and Dutch. This is made easy due to the close relationship between Dutch and Frisian languages. Unlike the Basque case, the Frisian language cannot be considered a strong, contrastive identity marker (Marácz, 2011: 136-143). As a result, Smith is not optimistic about the revitalization of the Frisian ethnie and concludes that it is about to disappear (Smith, 1988: 92). However, apart from the revitalization efforts targeting the use of the Frisian language in the official media of the province of Fryslân, which broadcasts primarily in the Frisian language, and the representation of bilingual signs all over the territory of the province, there are other strong identity markers that are promoted in the province of Fryslân as well. These include the production of Frisian foods and drinks, dominating the milk industry via the multinational company Friesland Foods, and the promotion of Frisian sports to shape the collective Frisian identity. Let us discuss the following sports: 'keatsen' (Frisian handball), 'fierljeppen' (Frisian pole vaulting), 'skûtsjesilen' (Frisian sailing competition), and the so-called 'Alvestêdetocht' (Eleven Cities Tour).

Frisian handball, called 'keatsen' in Frisian (and 'kaatsen' in Dutch), is a traditional Frisian sport related to Basque pelota, American handball, and fives. Frisian keatsen is most commonly practiced in the province of Fryslân and is believed to be one of the oldest ballgames. The scoring is comparable to tennis, with the first team to score six games winning the match. The major Frisian handball tournament, called the PC (an abbreviation of Permanent Committee), has been held in the city of Frentsjer (Dutch Franeker) since 1854 and is considered the oldest regular sports tournament in the world.

Frisian handball is played on a rectangular lawn measuring 10 meters by 32 meters, with two teams consisting of three players each. In the center of one short side of the field is a receiving zone measuring five meters by 19 meters, defended by two players, while the other team member remains a field player. One of the opponents serves the hard leather ball with their bare hand from a serving box approximately thirty meters from the receiving zone. If they do not succeed in reaching the receiving zone, the receiving team gets a direct score. When the receiving team, whose players are allowed to wear a single hardened leather glove, returns the ball over the short line behind the serving box (called the upper line, or 'boppe' in Frisian), they also get a direct score. Of course, the serving team is allowed to prevent this from happening by hitting or holding the ball before the upper line. The place where the ball remains after such a rally is marked with a small woodblock called a 'keats', which is best defined as an undecided score. When two such undecided points occur (or one, if one of the teams is on game point), the teams change places. In the next rally, the team that then has the receiving position tries to

hit the ball past the first 'keats' and, if any, in the next rally past the second 'keats', thereby deciding the undecided points. Then, they start all over again.[12]

The word 'fierljeppen' is a Frisian language compound of 'fier' meaning "far" and 'ljeppen' meaning "leaping". Hence, it can be translated into English as "far-leaping". Fierljeppen is another traditional sport of the Frisian minority in the Dutch province of Fryslân. The sport involves a long pole and a body of water. The pole is between eight and thirteen meters long and has a flat round plate at the bottom to prevent it from sinking into the muddy river or canal bottom. A jump consists of a sprint to the pole over the jump ramp, jumping and grabbing it, then climbing to the top of the pole while trying to control its forward and lateral movements over a body of water, and finally finishing by landing on a sand bed opposite the starting point. Due to considerable parts of the Netherlands being below sea level, it has many waterways. Fierljeppen originated as a way for Frisians, especially farmers during agricultural work, to get around the waterways easily. Over time, it turned into a competition, with the first official match in 1771. However, the sport was not properly structured until 1957 when the Dutch Fierljep Federation (NFB) started to manage fierljeppen on a national basis, including fierljeppen associations that were active in the western part of the Netherlands as well.[13]

Skûtsjesilen is a Frisian regatta involving 'skûtsjes', which are cargo sailboats. In the early 19th century, competitions were organized with skûtsjes, for example, in 1820 in Snits (Dutch Sneek). Regattas were held when farmers had no cargo, and sailors could sometimes earn a cash prize when innkeepers organized a competition during a fair. The prize ceremony would be held in the inn. In the second half of the 19th century, clubs were founded to organize skûtsje regattas, and during this period, the amateur sport developed. Professional competitions became rarer, as professional skippers could not spare the time, and the number of participants began to decline. However, in the 20th century, cargo ships became increasingly motorized, and the number of skûtsjes began to decline. The cargo sailboats became available to amateurs as well. The Sintrale Kommisje Skûtsjesilen (Central Committee Skûtsjesilen or SKS) was founded in 1945.[14] While the number of race committees grew after the Second World War, the number of skûtsjes fell. In the 1950s, it was difficult for skippers to keep up payments to own a skûtsje. Foundations were set up to buy a skûtsje to support participation, and thus the current SKS championship arose with skûtsjes that came from a town or village which acted as sponsors. The Frisian shipyard owner Lodewijk Meeter was important for the continued existence of the sport during this period. In 1953, when the regatta would have been canceled due to low participation, Meeter arranged enough boats so the competition could continue. He was also the first skipper whose skûtsje was specially bought for competitions. In the 1970s and

12 See for more information on 'keatsen' the official website of the Royal Dutch Keats Federation. https://www.knkb.nl/. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

13 See for more information on fjierljeppen the official website of the NFB which has two members, namely the Frisian Ljeppers Federation (FLB) and the Dutch Polsstok Federation Holland (PBH). Together they represent 600 active fierljeppers in the Netherlands. https://www.nederlandsefierljepbond.nl/. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

14 See for more information the official website of SKS. https://www.skutsjesilen.nl/. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

1980s, it became possible for individuals to possess their own skûtsje. However, since these skûtsjes did not fit into the rules of the SKS proscribing that skippers had to come from a family of skippers, these skippers set up an alternate organization. In 1981, the 'Iepen Fryske Kampioenskippen Skûtsjesilen' (Open Frisian Championships Skûtsjesilen or IFKS) was formed. Currently, there are two Skûtsjesilen championships in Friesland. The SKS regatta has long been attended by a fixed number of fourteen skûtsjes, although there are skipper or crew changes, and often the ships are the same. The IFKS regatta has also grown over the years, and there are currently about sixty skûtsjes in four classes.[15]

The Frisian Alvestêdetocht (Eleven Cities Tour) is a long-distance tour skating event on natural ice, almost 200 kilometers long, which is held both as a speed skating competition with 300 competitors and a leisure tour with 16.000 skaters. The tour follows a closed or circular route along frozen canals, rivers and lakes visiting the eleven historic Frisian cities: Ljouwert (Dutch Leeuwarden), Snits (Dutch Sneek), Drylts (Dutch IJlst), Sleat (Dutch Sloten), Starum (Dutch Stavoren), Hylpen (Dutch Hindeloopen), Warkum (Dutch Workum), Boalsert (Dutch Bolsward), Harns (Dutch Harlingen), Frentsjer (Dutch Franeker), Dokkum (Dutch Dokkum), then returning to the Frisian capital Ljouwert again. The tour is held annually only if the ice is, and remains, at least 15 centimeters thick along the entire course as about 15.000 amateur skaters take part, putting high requirements on the quality of the ice. When the ice is suitable, the tour is announced and starts within 48 hours. The last tours were held in 1985, 1986 and 1997. All participants of the Eleven City Tour must be members of the Royal Association of the Eleven Frisian Cities.[16] A starting permit and bib are required which cost €100 in 2017. Skaters must collect a stamp in each city, and at three secret checkpoints, and must finish the track before midnight. There are often points along the route where the ice is too thin to allow mass skating. These points are called "kluning points" (from Frisian klúnje meaning to run on skates over a carpet), and the skaters walk on their skates to the next stretch of good ice. In 1997 ice-transplantation was introduced to strengthen weak spots in the ice, for instance under bridges. The finishing point of the Eleven Cities Tour is a canal near Leeuwarden, called the 'Bonkevaart'. The Eleven Cities Tour has been declared to be in danger of "extinction" due to climate change. In the past 50 years, the Eleven Cities Tour has taken place only three times, most recently in 1997. The Eleven Cities Tour is the biggest ice skating tour in the world.

The Frisian sports introduced above involving 'keatsen', 'fierljeppen', skûtsjesilen, and the so-called Eleven Cities Tour can be rightly referred to as "sports" in harmony with the definition of the Council of Europe and GAISF discussed earlier in this paper. In all the four sports there are clear competitive elements involved and they have a strong social function of bringing people together. For the Frisians these sports contribute to their collective identity and are considered as important identity markers of the Frisian culture. Besides the implications for

15 See for more information the official website of IFKS. https://www.ifks.frl/. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

16 See for more information on the Frisian Eleven Cities Tour the official website of the Royal Association the Frisian Eleven Cities. https://www.elfstedentocht.frl/de-vereniging/. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

local culture, the Frisian sports contribute to the perception of the Frisian culture to the outside world.

The Frisian sports are clearly recognized as such in the rest of the Netherlands. Some of these sports have spread to other parts of the Netherlands, like keatsen and fierleppen mobilizing Dutch participants. A number of the members of the Royal Association the Frisian Eleven Cities are from outside the province of Fryslân and have a permit to start in the skating competition or in the recreative tour of the Alvestêdetocht. Remarkably, also skûtsjesilen has appeared outside the province of Fryslân. In May 2014 under the name of Skûtsjesilen Holland a skûtsjesilen regatta took place near the city of Rotterdam for the first time. The overarching keats federation KNKB which was founded in 1897 includes 124 keats associations with almost 10.000 active players. Ten of the member associations are active outside the province of Fryslân in other parts of the Netherlands. The KNKB organizes the national keats competition and has supervision over the rules. It is seated in the city of Frentsjer (Dutch Franeker) where it also manages a keats museum. The NFB is the overarching federation of fierljeppen in the Netherlands. Since 2013, it has organized a cycle of eight competitions which include annually 140 official tournaments.

The Frisian sports do not only attract a number of recreative practitioners and spectators from the province of Fryslân but also a number of tourists from the rest of the Netherlands. Keatsen, fierljeppen, and skûtsjesilen competitions are visited by a number of national and international tourists in the summer months and are real social gatherings. The Eleven Cities Tour, when organized, has become a mass event with extensive national media attention. Due to unfavorite climate conditions, the tour has not been organized annually in Fryslân and alternatives have been elaborated. The skating competition is organized every year – except when it can be organized in Fryslân – in other European countries, like Sweden or Finland with better winter climate conditions for skating. In Fryslân itself the tour takes place each year in the summer months as a biking and rollerskating event with a number of recreative participants.

Of the four Frisian sports we have discussed above, only keatsen has reached the international and supranational level of global sports governance. Although the KNKB is not a member of global umbrella organizations like GAISF, keatsen was featured as a demonstration sport at several Summer Olympic Games, including the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam.[17] The KNKB is, however, a member of the Confédération Internationale du Jeu de Balle (CIJB), which was founded on May 13, 1928. The CIJB has strived to develop one international handball game variant based on several different autochthonous variants, such as Frisian keatsen, Basque pelota, and others, including autochthonous variants in European countries like Belgium, Italy, England, Wales, Ireland, and Sweden. The CIJB itself has become a worldwide organization that supervises European and World Championships in the international variant of the handball game.[18]

17 Compare Van Rossem (1928).

18 See the website of the CIJB. https://cijb.info/. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed two case studies concerning the sports of ethnic and national minorities, i.e. the Basques and the Frisians. These ethnic and national minorities are considered as 'ethnies' in the sense of Smith. Nations have the opportunity to use sports as a vehicle to strengthen their national identity and consciousness in international sports competitions, like the Olympic Games and World Championships. These international competitions contribute to the self-assertations of the national participants. This level of participation is not open for ethnies. These being excluded from these international and supranational levels of sports representation have cultivated the sports they have inherited and are closely associated with their collective identity. Two such cases were discussed in this paper, i.e. the Basque sports of pelota and the Frisian sports of keatsen, fierljeppen, skûtsjesilen, and the so-called Alvestêdetocht. At the local level, these sports contribute to the revitalization of the collective identity. This is especially important in the Frisian case where the role of language as an identity marker is much more limited due to its similarity to Dutch than in the Basque case where language is a strong contrastive marker compared to Spanish and French. In the former case, sports identity can compensate for the loss of language identity.

In the age of globalization, sports are employed as soft power instruments for the projection of national prestige. In the case of ethnies that are excluded as minorities from international competitions, we observe that their unique sports disciplines are spreading and developing into worldwide organizations and events. The representative bodies of these unique sports disciplines can become members of international sports federations, such as GAISF and CIJB, which is the case for Basque pelota and Frisian keatsen. These sports have also joined the international level of sports governance by featuring as demonstration sports at Olympic Games. These are strong soft power tools to popularize these ethnies' sports and to give their representative bodies an international position within global sports governance. As a side effect of globalization, an intensification of the commercialization of sports appears. The commercialization of ethnies' sports can boost the promotion of these sports, which can, in turn, be used as a tool of soft power to gain international recognition. In the case of Basque pelota, we interviewed two professional pelota players who make a living by playing the game, just like soccer players from the Basque professional soccer club Atletico de Bilboa. In the case of the fierljeppen competition in the Netherlands, the Austrian company Red Bull, producing energy drinks of the same name, turned out to be the main sponsor of the national fierljeppen events in 2022.[19]

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19 See the website of the Red Bull Fierljeppen competition in the Netherlands. https://www.redbull.com/nl-nl/red-bull-fierste-ljepper-2022. Accessed: 2023, January 30.

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