

# Will the Paris 2024 Olympics be a platform for activist protests amid global tensions?

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Athletes and sporting teams have frequently used the Olympics and other sporting events to make political statements through boycotts and protests. Ahead of the Paris Olympics kicking off this month and amidst

the current UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) European Football Championship (Euro 2024), researchers are asking—should sport be a platform for promoting social justice issues?

The 2024 Paris Olympics, like the Euro 2024 soccer tournament, will be watched by billions of people and command media attention around the globe. While athletes take to their arenas, the conflicts waging around the world show no signs of easing.

[A study](#) by Aston University and Teesside University in the UK and the University of South Australia found that 80% of sporting fans oppose using the Euro 2024 tournament as a political platform for the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts. The study is published in *Soccer & Society*.

UniSA's senior lecturer in sport and management, Dr. Jamie Cleland, says a majority of fans believe Euro 2024 shouldn't be weaponized by social and political events. This is despite a general understanding among surveyed participants of how sport has triggered global political shifts in the past.

"Eight out of 10 fans reject the idea that football should be used to try and promote peace in Ukraine, Gaza or elsewhere, despite the tournament's huge audience. Our findings reveal that most sporting fans agree that football can be a potent platform to mount social and political missions—they just don't want it to happen during Euro 2024," he says.

"People believe politics isn't an integral part of sport and this is interesting because at the same time we saw that three quarters of our study's participants support UEFA's expulsion of Russia from international football."

Dr. Cleland says athletes using the sporting arena as a political platform is not new. Protests at the Olympic Games date to 1906 when English

track and field athlete Peter O'Connor climbed up the Olympic flagpole with an Irish flag in protest of being considered a British competitor.

In more recent times, many famous athletes from various sporting codes have signaled their desire to use sport as a catalyst for change. Following the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, sports stars from the NBA (National Basketball Association) to the English Premier League have spoken out on the matter.

In 2022 all members of the Iranian football team declined to sing their country's national anthem before their match against England at the World Cup, in a show of solidarity with protesters in Iran. The silence was a powerful act of defiance against the Iranian government following the death in police custody of 22-year-old woman Mahsa Amini.

The Euro 2024 tournament has already seen a surge in pro-Palestinian displays in the stands despite a ban on flags from non-participating countries. Activists have also been visible en route to matches, handing out hats to fans in a show of pro-Palestinian solidarity.

While social justice and political advocates have used [sporting events](#) to their advantage, sporting fans aren't so tolerant of activism led by sporting authorities or sponsors.

Dr. Cleland says the cynicism of fans mustn't be confused with indifference as many people believe football governing organizations lack sincerity and integrity.

"Sports fans are irked by the opportunism that some sporting corporations take—protest is good for business but they're not actually doing anything. Their stance is based on commercial expediency," he says.

One survey participant described some instances of activism at sporting events as performative rather than effective.

"Wearing rainbow-colored laces might make a few footballers feel good about themselves for a game but does that change the environment to allow gay players to come out?" they said. "And if not, why does anyone think making some sort of gesture at the Euros will make either Israel stop attacking Gaza or Hamas release their hostages, or will make Putin withdraw his troops from Ukraine?"

**More information:** Ellis Cashmore et al, Will EURO2024 struggle to keep war protests out of football? 8 out of 10 fans oppose using the tournament as a political platform for Ukraine and Gaza, *Soccer & Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2024.2359185](https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2024.2359185)

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