

Romania at the Olympics: Women Gymnasts as Ambassadors in Sportswear, 1950s-1970s

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Researchers in history, sociology, and anthropology describe the sports stadium as “the spiritual sanctuary of modern worshipper.”¹ Sporting events are more than games and entertainment. Sporting arenas are secular cathedrals; they celebrate liturgies of unity by sharing powerful emotions collectively. Mass sporting events are collective rituals and these events have provided powerful sites where nationalisms unfold and take shape. Sporting events are thus transcendent moments for citizens and nations². Sport is a distinctly modern form of cultural practice, influenced by mass media such as television, radio, newspaper, and magazine coverage. Contemporary media, as an international industry of culture, heightens the public element of sport and fosters enormous popular appeal.

In twentieth-century stadiums and arenas, perhaps more so than other sites, athletes and citizens participated in, and contested, the meanings of national identity and national status. Often these events occurred within international contexts, such as the Olympics or the World Cup. Cheers (and boos), as scholars have demonstrated, show participants’ support (or opposition) to nations. While sports and nationalism historians have nicely shown how events on the athletic field reflect national and international conflicts, we know less about what happens behind the scenes, about the training of the athletes, and about how athletes are expressly used by regimes to further their own goals³. Also we know less about how the athletes resist and/or comply with the meanings their respective countries hope to assign to their athletic performances.

I argue that the Romanian government had a specific nationalist agenda for women gymnasts participating at the Olympics, in the second half of the twentieth century, a trend that specifically began during the mid-1950s. First, as representatives of Romanian elite sport, women gymnasts were expected to perform at a high level and thus bring home prestigious medals, which, in turn, would ensure international

¹ Michael Novak, quoted in *European Heroes. Myth, Identity, Sport* (ed. by Richard Holt, J. A. Mangan and Pierre Lanfranchi), London, 1996, p. 171.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Tribal Identities. Nationalism, Europe, Sport* (ed. by J. A. Mangan), London, 1996; *Sport and International Politics* (ed. by Pierre Arnaud and James Riordan), New York, 1998; Jim Riordan and Arnd Kruger, *The International Politics of Sport in the 20th Century*, New York, 1999; Alain Baimier, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives*, Albany, 2001; *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation* (ed. by Mike Cronin and David Mayall), London, 1998.

prestige for the obscure socialist nation of Romania. Second, Romanian sport officials paid careful attention to the national image these athletes projected abroad. Romanian gymnasts had to be model citizens, with a “correct” moral and ideological profile. Third, members of the Romanian Federation of Gymnastics (RGF), coaches, and Romanian referees used their networking skills to shape a positive attitude towards the Romanian team and Romania itself. They cultivated friendly relationships with international referees who judged gymnastic routines at international competitions. The RGF also used international media to convey positive information about Romanian athletes. Thus, a look behind the scenes of the Olympics shows how Romania relied on international sporting events to construct and promote a specific national image.

It is widely acknowledged that Romania became a powerhouse in women’s gymnastics in the mid-1970s with the astonishing performances of Nadia Comăneci at the Montreal Olympics⁴. Since 1976, as international sports fans can attest, Romanian women gymnasts have consistently ranked in the top tier of the global gymnastics hierarchy, dominating competitions such as the Olympics and the World and European Championships. Less well-known, however, is the fact that Romanian gymnasts frequently placed among the top six nations at the Olympics *before* 1976. This essay focuses on this earlier period that precedes Nadia Comăneci’s celebrated rise to stardom.

At the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Finland, the Romanian team placed 9th out of 18 nations participating in the women’s competition. This was the lowest position Romanians would ever occupy in gymnastics competitions during the post-World War II history of the Olympic Games. Four years later, at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics in Australia, Romanian women placed third – out of 9 competing nations – and earned 2 bronze medals (1 for the team and another in the individual competition). Elena Leuștean was the first Romanian gymnast to receive an individual medal at the Olympics – not Nadia Comăneci.

Romania’s success continued throughout the 1960s. At the 1960 Rome Olympics, Romania finished 3rd out of 27 countries. The women gymnasts earned another team bronze medal, while the top Romanian gymnast, Sonia Iovan, placed fifth in the individual competition. In Tokyo four years later, the team’s production fell off, and Romania finished a disappointing, though still strong, 6th place out of a field of 23 participating countries. Due to the retirement of valuable gymnasts and the lack of highly-qualified replacements, Romanian sports officials assumed that women’s gymnastics team would not win any medals in 1968, nor would it qualify among the top teams. Thus, they withdrew the women’s team from the Mexico City games. Hoping to build better success during the 1970s, the RGF instead turned its attention toward building contacts with coaches from the Soviet Union and Japan, who were, at that time, the leading powers in women’s and men’s world gymnastics.

⁴ On Nadia Comăneci’s career see, among others, Ioan Chirilă, *Nadia*, Bucharest, 2002 and Nadia Comăneci, *Letters to a Young Gymnast*, New York, 2004.

During 1969, the Romanian Ministry of Education and Instruction designated the city of Onești to be the host for the first Romanian gymnastics school. (This is where Bela Karolyi discovered Nadia Comăneci.) The Romanian team reappeared at the Olympics in Munich during 1972, and the women finished as the 6th team out of 23. While the Romanian team did not reach the podium between 1964 and 1972, the women's gymnastics team and coaches laid the foundation for the profound successes of 1976. In Montreal, Romanian women gymnasts received the team silver medal; and Nadia Comăneci literally “stole the show,” earning the first “perfect 10” in the history of the Olympic Games. Since 1976, until 2004, Romanians were a constant presence on the Olympic podium, sharing it with the powerful Soviet Union (later Russia) and the United States. At the 1980, 1988, and 1992 Olympics, Romanian women's team won silver medals, in 1996 it placed 3rd overall, and at the 2000 and 2004 Olympics Romanian gymnasts won Olympic golds for the team. All these team triumphs were accompanied by tens of gold, silver and bronze Olympic individual medals in the individual all-around competitions, as well as in the vault, beam, uneven bars, and floor exercise finals.

Although the Romanian gymnastics team never won the Olympic gold or silver before 1976, the results were nonetheless important. Ranking high at the Olympics meant making Romania more visible, that is more noticeable abroad. As the leader of the Romanian delegation to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics noted, “Our country is no longer a part of the anonymous 70 countries that participate at the Olympics. Romania became a top-ranking country in the global sports... We have to make all the efforts to maintain and strengthen the prestige we attained.”⁵ Romania was not unique in its sporting policies, however. It followed the pattern introduced by the Soviet Union and the other countries of the Eastern European communist bloc, which used sport as a battleground with Western nations during the Cold War⁶.

Good results were important for the Romanian government officials, but medals alone were not enough. Decision makers within the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport (CPCS) wanted to promote the “new type of athlete” abroad – who was, specifically, a model *socialist* citizen who understood Romanian politics, history, and literature⁷. Officials made a considerable effort to train the athletes in the area of well-rounded socialist citizenship. According to a report on the training of the

⁵ “Raportul deplasării lotului olimpic al RPR la Olimpiada de la Melbourne 1956”, file 345, p. 35, National Council for Physical Education and Sport Collection, National Archives, Bucharest, Romania (hereafter NCPESC-NA-BRO).

⁶ For a recent collection of articles on the topic, see *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War* (ed. by Stephen Wagg and David Andrews), London, 2006.

⁷ The Committee for Physical Culture and Sport (CPCS), founded in 1949, was reorganized in 1957 under a new name, the Union for Physical Culture and Sport (UPCS). In 1967 UPCS was replaced by the National Council for Physical Education and Sport (NCPES), which existed until 1989. The phrase “new athlete” can be found in several archival documents and newspapers in the 1950s. It is related directly to the postwar regime's goal to create the “new man/woman” in charge of building communism.

athletes for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, the athletes were required to spend 1.5 hours of every week studying history, geography, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, current international events, music, literature, and English language⁸. The aim was, as the report noted, “to complete and refresh athletes’ general and political knowledge, and to ensure the minimum level of knowledge necessary to an athlete abroad.”⁹ The Committee for Physical Culture and Sport, the Ministry of Culture, Agerpres – the Romanian press agency, and the Institute of Physical Culture provided teachers for these lessons. Officials distributed notebooks to athletes and set up a library with study materials in the training camp.

Athletes’ free time was carefully supervised in order to ensure a “pleasant and favorable atmosphere” necessary for their Olympic preparations. They were encouraged – not coerced – to visit museums and art exhibits, to attend theater performances and lectures offered by the Romanian-Russian Friendship Institute, and to participate in book review/discussion sessions. These activities reflect officials’ desire to educate athletes as model socialist citizens – athletes that would make a good impression during their travels abroad.

Despite these opportunities, gymnasts – and other athletes as well – rarely took advantage of the educational and cultural activities offered. In July 1956, those in charge of organizing athletes’ free time complained that athletes tended to choose “more amusing” types of entertainment: they went to movies (most of them produced in the capitalist countries of the West), and they did not use the library set up for them in the training camp. Moreover, only newspapers with crosswords proved popular among the athletes¹⁰. Leaders of the Olympic delegation complained about athletes’ “cosmopolitan” views, “political disorientation,” and ignorance of the scientific, technological, and cultural achievements of Romania and the other socialist countries. In one official’s words, “athletes know little about our recent history, about these past twelve years” since the communist takeover in 1944¹¹. At the same time, the official noted that, while abroad, gymnasts and other athletes frequently visited historical landmarks, exhibits, museums, but at home visits of this sort did not exist. To improve athletes’ knowledge about Romanian socialism, officials from CPCS proposed visits to heavy industry sites or scientific institutes in Bucharest. The intention was “to improve their political education that in turn would contribute to their patriotic education.”¹²

Archival documents provide a clear record of sport leaders’ efforts to present abroad not only very well-trained athletes, but also cultured citizens who possessed high morals and a solid knowledge of the socialist regime’s noteworthy

⁸ *Darea de seamă asupra stadiului de pregătire a loturilor olimpice, 1 Ianuarie-20 Septembrie 1956* (25 September, 1956), file 355, p. 14, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 39. Recent studies see the year 1946 as the date for the communist takeover, with 1944-1946 as a transitory period to the communist regime.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 40.

achievements¹³. Athletes' reluctance to take part in these cultural and educational activities suggest they were focused on the athletic side of their Olympic training, and they were less interested in the ideological aspects that the regime invested in Romania's participation at the Olympiads.

Closely supervising athletes on their trips abroad – especially at the Olympics – was a key part of sports officials' task to present Romania in a favorable light, controlling Romanians' contacts with other athletes and sports officials from other countries. The various sport Romanian federations each appointed an official to organize and supervise trips abroad. Upon their return, they had to submit a written report that explained, in detail, athletes' performances and individual behavior. In addition, the representatives discussed all the details about transportation, accommodations, and contacts the team made abroad. A literary genre in itself, worthy of a further study, these reports gathered valuable information about the organizational capacities of the host-countries, about the personnel in the Romanian embassies who proved very helpful (or not) in facilitating athletes' visits, and provided detailed discussions of athletes' performances during competitions (both good and bad).

Personal characterizations of each Romanian gymnast constituted a very important theme in these reports. Aside from the technical details of the athletes' performances during competitions, the team leader wrote about their overall behavior, unbeknownst to their knowledge. For instance, after participating at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, Marius Marcu, head of the Romanian delegation, noted in his report, "Our gymnasts performed well during competitions and had a more constant routine at all apparatuses, as compared to gymnasts from countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia or Japan." Elena Leuștean as Marcu noted did well, but he thought there was room for improvement: "Leuștean's potential is way higher, but she doesn't work as seriously as she could during practice." Further on, the official complained about the unfriendly atmosphere and animosity that plagued the ranks of the women's gymnastics team, despite coaches' efforts to maintain a more collegial atmosphere among the team members. He called attention to "the elitist attitudes of some gymnasts," which negatively influenced the other Romanian gymnasts, now unable to train in an optimal environment¹⁴. It is clear from these reports that athletes' every move was under careful surveillance and it was recorded in order to correct and prevent any lapses in their behavior.

Leaders of the RGF strategically prepared for gymnasts' participation at the Olympics by making contacts with host-countries in order to build a welcoming environment. Ideally, the RGF hoped a hospitable environment would benefit the Romanian women gymnasts' performances. For example, in 1956, the Federation

¹³ Also worth mentioning is the fact that in their job contracts, gymnastic coaches had to pledge to educate the athletes "in the spirit of loving their country." See, for instance, Nagy Zoltan, *Plan de muncă pe anul 1954*", file 453, p. 112, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

¹⁴ *Raportul deplasării lotului*, p. 23.

sent ready-made articles about Romanian sport, that were to be published, at their request, by Australian newspapers, as well as prestigious European sport periodicals such as *L'Équipe* in France, or *Gazzeta dello Sport* in Italy¹⁵. These articles, sent via Agerpres, the Romanian press agency, described the overall development of athletic facilities in Romania, offered details about Romanian athletes' training for the Olympic Games, and presented short portraits of the gymnasts who would participate at the Games. Through these publicity campaigns, RGF officials emphasized Romania's gymnastics prowess by informing Olympic host nations and other European countries about the potential for Romanian athletes to win Olympic medals. In addition, press releases provided a very good opportunity to remind the world that Romanian athletes' performances were very much a product of the superior socialist system.

RGF officials also organized special tournaments to gain special attention from the hosts of the Olympic Games. Such was the case with the 1960 Olympics in Rome. Strategically, Romanian planners, together with their Italian counterparts, organized a gymnastics competition in Italy two years before the Games. According to the report submitted after this competition, the Romanians achieved all they had planned for. Emil Ghibu, the chief of the Romanian delegation, wrote that the women gymnasts were successful in building friendly relations with the country that was scheduled to host the Olympic Games in 1960. In his words, "extremely important was the fact that our gymnasts left a very good impression that is conducive of a very sympathetic welcome for Romanians at the Olympic Games in Rome."¹⁶ In this 1958 tournament, Romanians also trained with the Italian women's gymnastics team, which actually provided the Italians with the "necessary and serious support" required to learn difficult gymnastics routines.

Not only did the Romanians help the Italians and cement relationships, but they also managed to cut costs. It proved to be a very economical trip, since all room, board, and transportation expenses were paid for by their Italian hosts. Moreover, the entire Romanian delegation received 120,000 Italian *lire* that covered the Romanians' per diem allowances. In this way, the Romanian Gymnastics Federation was able to accomplish a variety of goals without spending any money from their own (limited) budget.

The Committee for Physical Education and Sport tried to create a favorable environment for Romanian gymnasts by sending gifts to the organizers of the Olympic Games and the other persons of interest in the International Olympic Committee and the International Gymnastics Federation (IGF)¹⁷. Romanian officials

¹⁵ *Raportul pentru Jocurile Olimpice din 1956. Divizia economică*, file 327, p. 20, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

¹⁶ *Raport asupra deplasării lotului RPR de gimnastică în Italia, 14-25 iunie 1958*, file 548, p. 44, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

¹⁷ Romanian participation at these meetings, as well as Romanian membership in these organizations meant that Romanian officials dealt with the West on Western terms. On the process of cultural adaptation that Soviet officials experienced as members of the International Olympic

wanted to give gifts that represented the best of Romanian culture. In 1956, as the Melbourne games approached, Romanian sports officials faced the challenging (and costly) task of sending a large delegation with a vast collection of luggage and gifts. Officials wanted to maximize the amount of luggage space that would be devoted to the transportation of gifts to recipients at the games, placing limits on the amount of luggage that the athletes could carry. The documents that recorded the centralized planning of the trip to Melbourne provided a gold mine of information about the gifts to be taken. The Romanian officials counted on 300 kg of gifts that would be brought with the team to Australia. The treasure trove of presents included folk rugs and embroidered tablecloths, wooden gourds and painted wooden cigarette boxes, small dolls dressed in traditional national costumes, stamp albums, fabrics decorated with national motifs, and silk headscarves imprinted with images from the Romanian capital, Bucharest. Two thirds of the goods were alcoholic: 150 liters of Romanian wine and 50 liters of *țuică*, Romanian plum brandy¹⁸. (Based on archival documents, it is not clear how were these goods distributed.)

Romanians offered gifts whenever delegations of various athletes traveled to competitions abroad. (Foreign guests at Romanian tournaments received gifts as well.) Officials who documented the competitions abroad often wrote about the gifts and their reception among the recipients. “These gifts,” wrote one sport official, “brought an extreme satisfaction to the hosts, who were completely impressed by our offerings.”¹⁹ There were many instances, however, when the Romanian officials complained about the quality and the wrapping of the gifts they had to work with. They blamed the CPCS in particular who handed over the gifts without adequate packaging. These gifts – which included record albums of Romanian music, tablecloths, embroidered blouses and doilies, cigarettes, and bags – were typically crammed into luggage, and, as one official pointed out, “they got so wrinkled, so we could not offer them during the official reception. As much as we would have tried to wrap them in good or bad paper, their aspect was still like a packet from an unskilled butcher.”²⁰

The shoddy packaging was in stark contrast with how other non-Romanian delegations, both Western and Soviet bloc, presented their gifts. Although not as valuable as the gifts offered by the Romanian delegation, the other delegations’ presents were wrapped in “original, beautiful” paper, and had the national emblem of their respective countries. Although offering presents was not uniquely Romanian, the fact that Romanian officials were eager to uphold quality standards for these

Committee see Barbara Keys, *The Soviet Union, Global culture, and the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games*, paper presented to the Conference on Globalization and Sport in Historical Context, University of California, San Diego, March 2005 (in possession of the author).

¹⁸ *Propunere de cadouri pentru Melbourne*, file 355, p. 25, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

¹⁹ *Raport asupra delegațiilor șahiști români participanți la Olimpiada de șah din URSS, 1956*, file 279, p. 293, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁰ *Raport asupra deplasării echipei de tir a RPR la Copenhaga, Helsinki și Budapesta în perioada 21 iunie -11 iulie 1956*, file 345, p. 92, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

gifts, and sometimes even hoping to upstage other countries, shows how these officials tried to build a favorable reputation for Romania and its athletes.

Romanian officials hoped that networking with international referees would provide a way to bring home good results. The Romanian Gymnastics Federation had a comprehensive plan to gather data about persons of interest in the International Gymnastics Federation (IGF). First, Romanian bureaucrats in the federation identified from among the IGF leaders those who came from the Eastern European communist bloc. They would be approached first. Lists – that survived in the archives – had to include the name of the international official, their country of origin, their position in the international organization, the duration of their mandate in the international organization, and what foreign languages they knew²¹. The next step was to identify within the Romanian federation those coaches and referees who had “personal relationships with officials in the international federation that could potentially influence favorably the Romanians.” The lists compiled in 1958 showed a list of five Romanian officials who had “very good, friendly, principled, or comradely” relationships with referees and officials from Hungary, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia. In the West, Romanian officials had contacts with referees in France, Finland, and Italy²². All these officials, perceived as having a friendly attitude towards the Romanians, were invited to attend various competitions in Romania that preceded the Olympic Games²³.

Another piece of information in the lists compiled by the bureaucrats of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation is especially illuminating: the RGF studied which referees had a so-called “weakness” that could be exploited to Romania’s advantage. For instance, in 1960, judges from Finland, Italy, and France were identified to like “Romanian art,” a Hungarian judge was noted to prefer “stamps and insignias,” and another was observed to be fond of photographs. In the case of Valeria Verpich, a Hungarian judge, it was noted that she liked “to be flattered,” but the document does not reveal how the Romanians might have tried to gain her support, so we can only speculate²⁴. What these documents reveal, however, is that Romanian sports administrators took active steps to build relationships with international officials and judges who would favor Romanians in international competitions. This was crucial, as a result of the subjective nature of evaluation in gymnastics. The RGF demanded success in the area of networking.

Women gymnasts, as well as sports officials, were vital ambassadors in sportswear. In addition to direct competition, networking was a key activity that

²¹ *Documente necesare in probleme internaționale in vederea Jocurilor Olimpice – 1960-Roma*, file 384, p. 108, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²² *Legături personale în cadrul federației internaționale cu influență pozitivă în favoarea noastră*, file 384, p. 98, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²³ *Propuneri de invitare în RPR ca arbitri la concursuri internaționale*, file 384, p. 101, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

²⁴ *Arbitrii streini utilizați în competiții mondiale și jocurile olimpice*, file 384, p. 100, NCPESC-NA-BRO.

accompanied Romanian participation in the Olympic Games. The behind-the-scenes archival record reveals Olympic competition to be a collective, broadly based endeavor, involving athletes, coaches, federation officials, staffers, Romanian referees, and newspaper writers. Their work was visible only once every four years, yet networking and training were continuous. As a result, Romanian gymnastics ranked high at the Olympics throughout the entire postwar period.

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