

The Geopolitics Behind FIFA | Dr. Rolando Dromundo

Dr. Rolando Dromundo, political analyst, journalist, and author, discusses the politics behind the FIFA World Cup, FIFA's power, double standards on sanctions, host-country pressure, public spending, sportswashing, and national identity. The talk also covers Russia, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the role of states, and whether a changing world order could force reform in global sports. Links: [BOOK] State-Building in the Middle of a Geopolitical Struggle: The Cases of Ukraine, Moldova, and Pridnestrovia: <https://www.amazon.com/State-Building-Middle-Geopolitical-Struggle-Pridnestrovia/dp/3838211723> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:51 Politics behind the World Cup 00:04:31 FIFA, host countries, and public money 00:11:49 Russia, Israel, and double standards 00:16:54 FIFA as a private power structure 00:26:53 Can FIFA be reformed? 00:33:07 Could countries leave FIFA? 00:39:44 Football, identity, and nations 00:47:00 Multipolarity and future World Cups 00:51:18 Final thoughts on FIFA power

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today we have Dr. Rolando Drumundo, a political analyst and journalist, and the author of the book *State Building in the Middle of Geopolitical Struggle: The Case of Ukraine, Moldova, and Transnistria*. Today we want to discuss the politics of the ongoing FIFA World Cup. So, Rolando, welcome.

#Rolando Dromundo

Hello, Pascal. Thank you for having me. It's an honor.

#Pascal

Thank you very much for reaching out and for actually pitching the idea of doing a talk about FIFA and the World Cup, because the politics behind this is often kind of camouflaged. We are led to believe that this is a sporting event only. But as we've seen in the very way that Donald Trump handled even just the Iran team, it is anything but that. So, Rolando, can you maybe tell us, first and foremost, what is your analysis of the politics behind the World Cup?

#Rolando Dromundo

Of course, Pascal. Well, first of all, it's a very atypical World Cup. It is the first that has 48 teams. So FIFA decided to enlarge the already big cup that had 32 participants. Now it has 48, which of course

increases, I mean, everything—the requirements for organizing, the stadiums, and everything. But it's also atypical in the sense that, for instance, at the beginning of the World Cup, you had one country at war against another of the participants, for example. So it's like... Besides that, you have a President of the United States who has been diminishing, harassing, and attacking his neighbors, playing with the idea of Canada as a 51st state, and until some weeks before, they were speculating about military strikes against Mexico. There has been, obviously, a very aggressive speech all the time against Mexicans.

It's written that it represents migration. So all this together, plus, of course, the already very publicized migration policy of the United States that has caused a lot of controversies around the world, makes it a very atypical World Cup. Because besides that, we also have a U.S. president who received something created expressly for this event, which was the FIFA Peace Prize. I mean, it was like FIFA's way of compensating for the fact that Donald Trump really expected, I mean, the idea that he was going to win somehow the Nobel Peace Prize. And once this was not true, even if you had Corina Machado go to the White House and give her the actual prize and everything, FIFA was in need to appease Donald Trump and created this absurd idea of a FIFA Peace Prize.

And you have all this ceremony and Donald Trump smiling like a child, pretending, oh yeah, I'm a hero. And he already, all the time, changes the number of wars he considers he has ended. But altogether, this is part of the political conflict that surrounds the World Cup, of course. And that's why it's very interesting, because you have FIFA that, of course, on one side pretends to say this is an apolitical event, we have nothing to do with it, that there should be no political demonstrations, but on the other side, they are completely engulfed, completely submerged in the logic of giving Donald Trump whatever he wants. And I think that one of the facts that Infantino and Donald Trump agree on a lot of things is because they have this way of doing business in which they don't care whatever the context is.

It's only to maximize profit at all levels. And no matter what people say, no matter what the ethical standards may be, no matter what happens. So that's why I think there was a great understanding in that sense. We've seen a lot of issues about the ticket prices, for example. I was just comparing—I had the opportunity to attend the 2006 World Cup in Germany. I paid 70 euros at that time, 70 euros in 2006, for a second-round ticket that was an excellent match in the finals in Leipzig. So compared to that, you see now that you have prices for the final that range up to \$11,000. It's completely absurd. So altogether, yes, there are many, many, many facts from which we could approach this one by one, all the political issues related to the World Cup, you know?

#Pascal

Yeah. So what is your take? I mean, 48 countries is huge. And the sporting events, they've always had political connections. I mean, the Olympic Games, they always have a geopolitical dimension. And even in the ancient past, the ancient Olympic Games had geopolitical connections. I mean, they were famously the moments when even warring parties would have a ceasefire in order to go to the

games and then compete and go back, right? At least that was the ideal under which they were done. And we see very similar problems today, right?

That again, as you pointed out, Iran at war with the United States and then going there, the US actually refusing to host the team, to let it actually sleep and dine on its territory, they're having to go to Mexico. First of all, do you think that feud—that this is tenable for FIFA and for the Olympics and large sporting events to select one of the great powers going forward? And what do you think it is that we are learning from the current FIFA, the way that FIFA is dealing with this when it comes to these large international events?

#Rolando Dromundo

Well, large international events have always, always throughout history, and not only football, used the United States as a super showcase. It's like the biggest market, the biggest possibility. I mean, if we check the history, for example, of the Olympic Games, the Olympic Games really changed completely in the way they were being organized after Los Angeles '84. That was a moment that completely shifted the conception of what it could mean for business, for corporations, for all the sponsors to organize these games.

So that's why FIFA was perfectly aware, and they knew the risk, but they were considering that, I mean, the profit would be a lot more, even though FIFA's image had been damaged a lot. Because it's really... it's not only the ticketing issues and the prices and the abuses that are a lot, but it's also the fact that sometimes the public money spent is a huge, huge investment for other countries. So you compare in Canada, only two cities accepted because Montreal didn't want to invest the huge amount of money required by FIFA. You have FIFA that forces cities to engage in these contracts in which they have tax exemptions, a lot of favors, a lot of clauses regarding the law that have to be adapted to FIFA's pleasure. So you have this institution like FIFA that arrives and makes political agreements without being a political entity or being like a state, let's say. It plays politics, but outside what is the role of the states?

#Pascal

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#Rolando Dromundo

So, the big contradiction of sports... Right now, it's like you have these huge, huge sports organizations that pretend to be apolitical. Well, they need, they live, and they depend mostly on the public spending that is done by the states to organize these events. Because, of course, FIFA wants to determine the rules. FIFA never wants to allow, under any circumstances, that any local

government interferes in football, because that would be, like, chaos. Each time in history we can see that a country has tried to somehow intervene in sport, immediately FIFA doesn't allow it.

But when you have to organize the event, please pay me, no? So therefore the states invest these huge sums of money for the event, which obviously for many countries is not so easy, no? And that's why the fact of organizing in the United States allows this possibility — they always have the money, they always have the resources, they always have the possibility. They can allow themselves to have this huge number of games and sell the tickets to amateurs for more than \$1,000 per ticket, and somebody will buy them, because it's something you can allow yourself, as an organizing committee, to do in the United States.

And that's why it's so profitable and so attractive for them to do it. And without already considering the sports industry, a part of organizing that event is like, what is your history in this sport? You know, for example, what have you done, what are the results, are you really concerned? Morocco had been trying for years, and with a lot better results in football, to be a host of the World Cup, but they have never been allowed that, because obviously it's different, no? And also the political push, and not to say the showcase that it represents.

I mean, at the end, Donald Trump, who likes to be the center of attention, will have a FIFA World Cup and he will have the Olympic Games if he's still in the presidency in 2028. So that's why, and this is the main issue, but also the main contradiction — at FIFA, and not only FIFA, the way international sports stand today, they have absolutely no accountability. They have no way of giving any possibility of clarifying or showing any kind of transparency — how they deal with sponsors, how they deal with the real negotiation of how they give the candidacy to any country. At the end, that's why we have been...

Picturing a lot of scandals of corruption in international sport, we remember what happened with Joseph Blatter and Andrew Avelange years ago, but that won't be the last, because there is absolutely no intention of modifying the structures of accountability of how FIFA is played, and there is absolutely no possibility today that states or international organizations may somehow interfere, regulate, control, or limit the power FIFA has now, and especially against small countries. Because if they, with the United States, can find that agreement, imagine when they have to organize events in South Africa, in Brazil, even in Mexico — the capacity of resistance is a lot less for local governments than it could be with a major power.

So that's why, and also this idea of creating these three host events to sell the idea that it's more multinational, multicultural, but it's half a fake because the United States has more than 80% of the games. They have all the quarterfinals, all the semifinals, they have the final, they have mostly everything. So you have only two countries added just to say, yeah, it's FIFA unites, football unites. No, but that's a fake, because football unites, but of course Mexican fans cannot go freely to the United States because, I mean, 80% of the Mexican population does not have a U.S. visa. And also, it's part of the contradictions continuously visible in international sports nowadays.

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of hypocrisy involved in all of this. I mean, one part then is, of course, also this issue of who gets to participate and who doesn't. And actually, I must apologize, I don't know — what about Russia? They are not allowed to participate, right? Or under a neutral flag? Can you update me on that one?

#Rolando Dromundo

Well, this is very interesting because after four days in 2022 — that's when Russia attacked and invaded Ukraine — after four days, UEFA and FIFA were already banning and applying sanctions on Russia. But what about Israel? There are absolutely no sanctions, no intention, no suggestion of considering any sanctions against Israel. So there's a complete double standard in how the law applies in that sense. Yes, let's not forget, I mean, most of the European countries' sports organizations are extremely Eurocentric, but also they have followed whatever, like, the Western standards on how sanctions have been applied. If we see the historical way in which sanctions have played, they have been completely different, always like... Years ago, when the Soviet Union was a big power, there was no possibility for the institutions to apply sanctions directed at the Soviet Union.

Now the context has changed. Russia is completely out of the possibility of participating in UEFA competitions or in FIFA competitions. But instead, what I mean is a complete double standard. So what is the criteria? They invaded a country. OK, but what happened with Israel, for example? There's nothing in that case. And what happened with the United States? They attacked Iran. And who sanctioned the United States? Of course, nobody would dare to propose or even mention the idea of sanctioning the United States. It's a complete double standard that only showcases how the power relations in the world are established right now.

And the fact is that in that sense, it's extremely Eurocentric and Western-oriented. All the people that are heading the sports organizations around the world, I mean, all of them are based in Switzerland, mostly in Lausanne, except FIFA, which is in Zurich. But the fact is that there is a clear, clear double standard that doesn't have specific criteria. And it's not only for sanctions because, I mean, it's also for recognition, because the fact of recognizing—you have 193 states in the United Nations plus two observers. Instead, you have in FIFA more than 200 members.

You have Scotland, which is not an independent country, as a member of FIFA, but you have Catalonia, for example. Catalonia and Scotland have a very similar context, in which you have people with a big push to try to obtain independence, and in a very similar context, but they are not allowed in that sense. And, for example, you can see that a lot of territories that belong to the United Kingdom are allowed to have a separate delegation for FIFA. We have, for example, Curaçao, which is not an independent country, but it's participating in the World Cup. Curaçao belongs to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, for example.

So, in some cases you may, in some cases you don't. You have Kosovo as a member of FIFA, but you don't have Ossetia, for example, South Ossetia, or you don't have Abkhazia, for example, that are countries also in a similar condition that can be considered if we compare. So altogether, FIFA plays with that, but they don't have fixed criteria. It's not like, okay, in this case, let's sanction everybody that makes a war or attacks a country without the approval of the United Nations. That's not the case. Let's recognize only countries that belong to the United Nations or are closer to service. That's not the case.

At the end, there are many irregularities in how they operate, but obviously, it's clearly visible—the impact of the geopolitical context, the impact of what lets the dominant view prevail from a Western perspective. And that's how FIFA operates, together with maximizing the opportunity of doing business and allowing—especially allowing—sponsors to control and determine whatever is happening. Because at the end, it's in the interest of sponsors, it's in the interest of all the corporations that regulate, control, and push for changes of rules. I mean, the rotation break, for example, has created a lot of critics around the world because it's only a way of giving sponsors two more minutes during the first half, two more minutes during the second half. And altogether, it's like the sponsors rule, and the rest—I mean, like, it doesn't matter. Football is not the priority.

#Pascal

No, but you know, it's a fascinating case, actually, because it's, in a very pure sense, a power game, right? It's—FIFA is all about negotiation and who can do what and who can put what kind of pressure on the other in order to get something out of it. So it's actually a very good representation of the anarchic world in geopolitics, in realism, but also a representation of how there's a shared interest in organizing something. Everybody still wins if you manage to organize this kind of thing. And FIFA—I mean, the word FIFA itself is an abbreviation of the French title of the organization, Fédération Internationale de Football Association, so International Federation of Football Associations, right? And they are constituted as an association in Switzerland, which is a legal structure.

And as such, they are basically just a private corporation, just a private entity that, together with other private entities around the world—each country has its own, or each jurisdiction has its own kind of football association—and they then join FIFA in order to say, like, hey guys, we want to participate in your game. So it's actually all privately structured. However, as you said, there are reasons why FIFA wouldn't accept the Football Association of the Basque Country or of Catalonia to actually participate in their football. Do we know how big the structural role of government actually is? Because governments do have an interest in having certain things represented on the international stage and others not. So are some of these things due to political pressures, or is most of it actually coming from private interests of these various groups around the globe?

#Rolando Dromundo

There's also political pressure in the end. When negotiating, I mean, there's always a question of who wants what. I mean, who wants to organize the World Cup? It's been that way throughout the history of FIFA, even though the ways in which it has been done have changed. But FIFA has always been very close. I mean, let's not forget the second World Cup was organized in Italy in 1934 during Benito Mussolini's government. And it was like—for him, it was the ideal showcase, in which Italy won the World Cup and wanted to prove to the world how Italy was a great country, etc. And FIFA knows that. I mean, they don't mention it openly, but it was very clear. If somebody wants to use the concept of sportswashing, I mean, that can already be found from that point.

And it was not the first time. There were many cases in which it has been completely linked. In 1978, let's not forget, there was one of the most cruel military dictatorships in Latin America, in Argentina, and they organized the World Cup in 1978. They even received help during a match that would assure them to pass to the finals, and there were a lot of controversies because a lot of people disappeared. It was a dictatorship that had more than 30,000 people disappear, plus people killed, plus tortures, and one huge list of abuses. We still haven't finished finding all the horrors of what happened at that moment.

And FIFA simply closed their eyes to what was happening at that moment. Also, those are some of the examples we can go through in FIFA's history and find a lot. But the fact is that governments, of course, they know, of course, they play with it—some of them very openly. Qatar, for example—Qatar or Saudi Arabia—are two countries that were first. Qatar is a very interesting example because they have been engaging in an active public relations campaign around the world, mostly in Europe but in many different countries. And one of the ways they use it is through sports diplomacy, because they said, OK, you have Qatar Airways as a sponsor of many, many activities in Europe, football or others.

They're buying stadiums, they're buying teams. They are saying, okay, they actively want to change the idea or the mood of how people perceive these Arab monarchies. So that's why they organized, and the way they organized the last World Cup—I mean, FIFA had, for the first time in history, to change the date, not to be held in summer as it usually is in the northern hemisphere, but during the winter. I mean, it was very funny for all of us, in December with the snow outside, watching the World Cup. It was like, well, this is not common. But it was all because, obviously, of the way in which they managed to drive—because there's no other way to tell it—to drive all the FIFA leaders to convince them that Qatar was the ideal country.

And also because Qatar didn't mind spending this huge amount to build new stadiums, to build all the infrastructure needed, and to, like, at the end, it's a first-world country. Obviously, there were a lot of abuses regarding all the workers that participated in it, but FIFA can close their eyes to that. Qatar was an example, and we have a second example because after Qatar had a lot of success and still continues having success in how they're portraying their image through sports, Saudi Arabia started to do the same thing. So Saudi Arabia is also doing a lot of sports investing. Let's not forget Saudi Arabia will be the sole host of the 2034 FIFA World Cup.

So obviously they want to emulate or even do better in all regards, because if it will be a World Cup of 48 or even 64 countries, we don't know what FIFA will decide at that moment. The fact is that Saudi Arabia, they have the money, they have the resources, and especially they have the capacity of a government that will have everything under control. No process, no possibility of political opposition criticizing or saying, I don't like this, this is not the best idea, this is a lot of spending. So that's why governments, of course, they know that. They actively engage in that kind of negotiation. There was a famous saying in the committee, I think in the 70s, when they were asking back then who was... It was... I forgot his name, the president of the IOC in the 70s. I forgot his name. But the fact is that in...

#Rolando Dromundo

Once, in a comment, he mentioned that he preferred it because he had to organize the Olympic Games for 1980 in Moscow, and he was very happy. He said, "I prefer to organize events in countries where there is no opposition or democracy criticizing us because it's so much more practical." I don't remember the exact quote, but it was something like that, in the sense that it made it easier. So, Samaranch—Samaranch, of course, he was Catalan. And yeah, of course, Samaranch. So, the fact is that altogether, for FIFA, these are perfect scenarios.

Countries that are willing to do huge public spending, without a doubt. Of course, FIFA doesn't mind the political benefit they get. But if they are spending and giving them whatever they need, for them it's okay. And that's the fact at the end—public money being spent on a big, big, big event. But in few cases, that will become something that gives something tangible to the people. Because at the end, with mega events, sometimes there's a lot of public spending that doesn't really benefit the locals. They don't receive the benefit, and all the money goes to the corporations or to the organizers.

#Pascal

It's quite fascinating, though, that, you know, again, in a way, FIFA and the Olympic Games as well, they represent basically the collective West, right, or the system of the collective West. And we see it now. I mean, as you already explained, right, Russia was banned from FIFA, but neither was the United States, nor is Israel. So you kind of have this consensus of a group of countries that used to be able to tell everybody how things run. And we see that other countries actually do want to participate out of their own will. I mean, other people enjoy football. Therefore, they also want to have their own football teams, and they want to send them to this biggest global event, right?

So there is a shared interest, but the power structures, the way that this organization was formed and the way that it is governed are still very much operating under and within the collective West as a framework. Do you think that what's now happening is going to change that in any way, shape, or form? Or is this so entrenched that we should not expect a rethinking of FIFA as well? Because, you

know, the United Nations is blocked for different reasons internally from changing. How about FIFA? Do you see that change in this organization happening more than within the UN or not?

#Rolando Dromundo

Well, I think if there's a change, it will not come from FIFA. No, because in the end, what do we have in FIFA? FIFA is an organization that depends on the local federations of each member, no? And they are completely interacting. I mean, the fact that FIFA has so many members is a way for the leading group, by Infantino and the others, to assure loyalties with the smallest ones. You have, I don't know, 213, I think is the current number.

#Pascal

It has more than 200 members, but only 48 can go to the World Cup, actually.

#Rolando Dromundo

But they all vote when you have to decide a lot of things. They vote among themselves. So obviously, all the small federations, they are like easy, viable. You know, it's like their loyalty is very easy to buy because, in the end, for a small amount of resources, they are easier to convince. I think if there is a change, it has to come, I mean, again, from the states. And there are two things that I would underline in this sense. One, this has been noticed for many years.

During the 70s, there was a proposal at that time by the Cuban government, that Fidel Castro proposed that the Olympics should be handled by UNESCO. And he said it shouldn't be like a private entity; it should be UNESCO to determine, to organize, and to allow itself to select the host and everything. And he started to campaign for that, and there was certain political pressure. He angered some countries. There were numerous groups of countries that were already supporting the idea of pushing the Olympic Games to move from the IOC to UNESCO. The fact is that at that moment, at the same time, the Soviet Union was also trying to be the host of the Olympic Games.

So obviously they had to put their hand on Cuba and say, hey, come on, hold on. This is not for you. This is not your moment. So the Soviet Union stopped this Cuban campaign, and that was it. So I think at the end, there should be a political will among states to reorganize that, to organize that, to have a different view of how world sports should be. I mean, let's not forget, currently the U.S. is losing the hegemony they had. The United States is not the United States of the 1990s, when they thought they had complete control of the world. And this fake Fukuyama idea of the end of history, in which the United States would be the whole hegemonic power, that's gone. That doesn't exist anymore.

It's like, it's visible that the world is going to Asia. The center of the world is going around Asia. What kind of world order we'll have, we don't know yet, because we have issues to be solved in Iran

and in Ukraine that will certainly have an impact on how this new world order goes. But that will, or could at least, allow a window of opportunity to say, hey, why not consider a different force structure around the world? Why not give states a voice? It doesn't have to mean being completely the opposite or simply canceling the current structures, but at least give the states that are the ones that pay, because in the end it's always public money that sustains these events.

No, why don't the states have the voice and the opportunity to really limit and condition the way, and especially not allow the kind of abuses that are visible by FIFA on many, many levels? So I think that the window of opportunity is present, but you need some group of countries that are organized, that have the political will. And in this context, really, we have to see what kind of shape the world will have in the next five to ten years, because really it's difficult to know. We don't know what will happen in Taiwan, if there will be a war in five or ten years. We don't know how the Middle East crisis will finish. Europe is absurdly trying to push a war against Russia.

And so we don't know what could happen in many senses, but obviously after that, that allows opportunities to restructure. I think that could create, for sport, a good opportunity, together with the fact that FIFA's image is deteriorating all the time. People already see them as a corrupt, abusive organization—the way they handle workers, the way they treat local authorities. When you see all the contracts, all the tax exemptions, I mean, people in the end, they're not fools. Of course, people like football, and people are passionate about football. But still, I think for fans, you know, for fans, they're not fans of FIFA, no? Football fans are not fans of FIFA, no?

#Pascal

No, but again, the interesting thing is, while FIFA internally, with its members, has to function according to its charter, which does have some democratic kind of elements where the individual member associations get to vote, FIFA overall is not a democratic institution, right? It doesn't matter what the people of Ecuador and Colombia and of Spain and Italy or China think. FIFA will act based upon the FIFA charter and whatnot. And then that will all include a lot of money politics within the organization.

But one of the risks FIFA runs is one that, on the government level, is a little bit lower within the UN, but it's still there. That's that its members suddenly say, like, hey, you know what? Let's create another FIFA. Let's just get together, we all walk away, and then we create a new club. How big is that danger to FIFA? Are there talks? Are there people who say, like, no, we are on the verge of actually walking and just going out? I mean, what is Russia doing at the moment? What is the Russian Football Association doing now?

#Rolando Dromundo

I mean, Russia has football. They have a football league, and you have a lot of players that currently play in Russia who are participating in the World Cup with other national teams, for example. But the

fact is, I mean, you cannot stop football. In the end, people play football, and people continue to be organized. There are always parallel organizations. Obviously, it's not sanctioned and not recognized by FIFA, which excludes, you know—first of all, as I was mentioning, there's one association called CONIFA. They cover a lot of unrecognized states, but also a lot of different political movements or political ethnicities that want to have special representation.

So you have ethnicities from different regions, even from Canada or from Russia or from other countries, plus some unrecognized countries. You have Ossetia and Abkhazia also as members. So it's like a mix. I always like to say, FIFA does not want us, so we are going to FIFA. So everyone that wants to have a separate... Because at the end, the World Cup Federation is like... it's a sum of federations. At the end, a federation is a group of people. So everybody, any football organization, any sum of football clubs can organize and say, hey, we have an organization, let's call it whatever, and we can add members because that's what it is.

So when it remains beyond the optic of what the states can control, there's always the possibility of that parallel universe. So, um, I think that the states have to acknowledge and act together on what their real capabilities are, because, yeah, it's like FIFA has no—if you have a group of states, not only one or two, because each time it has happened very often that some country wants to intervene in a federation because they are not paying taxes, because of any kind of labor abuse, because of whatever reason. And FIFA immediately threatens sanctions on the country or with excluding the country from participating in the World Cup. So that's... For example, Iran was speculating with the idea—justified—that they might not participate in the World Cup, considering the current context, and FIFA immediately threatened sanctions, saying they could receive sanctions if they opted not to participate in the World Cup. Wait, wait, wait. Can you explain that to me?

#Pascal

I completely missed that. So Iran said, maybe we're not going to participate, and then FIFA said, if you don't join, we will sanction you guys. Really?

#Rolando Dromundo

Exactly, exactly. And at the same time, you had Donald Trump saying that he was not assuring the safety of the Iranian national team. So it's completely absurd. It's all about power. It's absolute nonsense. The fact is that single countries have no... At the end, what happens is that you remain isolated. So you need more. You need a group of countries that say, okay, this is a lot. No. And that has to come from some of the... at least some global powers at a certain level. So I think it's possible, but now I don't see the political will. I think it would happen before at the Olympic level, for example, around the International Olympic Committee, before happening to football. Football is a lot more Eurocentric, even though they have been in a big push.

And that's one of the reasons to increase the number of participants — to allow the market to grow in Asia and Africa. So, to grow in Asia and Africa. That's why they give a lot more assistance to these countries and try to increase the market in those regions. But nevertheless, football is still a very, very Eurocentric sport. We have a very interesting case in history, and that's one of the few cases in which FIFA, or UEFA in that case, had to back down — the Bosman case in the 90s, I think. Because in the Bosman case, you had the UEFA regulations—no, sorry, the European Union regulations for workers—assure that all members of the European Union have the right to work and have residency in other countries of the European Union.

UEFA at that moment opposed that idea, saying, okay, no, because we don't want a country to have all the players from another country that is not the same, and that would create a problem. So UEFA strongly opposed, and they ended up in court. After a long court process, the European Union won. And that was one of the few cases in which UEFA had to admit defeat and said, okay, now they had to change the regulation, and then all the UEFA teams could have a full squad of players from other countries that are not the host country, but they have to be UEFA members. So it's one of the few cases in which we can see that. But there are very, very few. And obviously, it's possible. I think it's possible for the states to organize. It's possible to have this talk at the level of the United Nations, at least at the level of regional organizations.

They have the power to do that because, in the end, FIFA is limited in the market. If Latin America would say that Latin America is a huge market for football consumption, of course, they could have the capability to pressure in a different way. In the end, now the country is completely subdued, completely forced. If you see in the Mexican case, it was a lot more abusive than with Canada and the United States, all the measures imposed by Canada. But in the end, countries don't say anything. They prefer to just sacrifice that for the purpose of the political impact this may have. But I mean, it's sad. But I think there is always a window of opportunity if there is political will among certain global powers that want to think about, let's say, reorganizing sports. Yeah.

#Pascal

But why do you think it is that in these sports—and sports often are not organized under a national flag, right? Football is usually organized according to clubs, so just clubs getting together and then they play against each other. Why do you think it is that even though the clubs are the heart of the entire industry, there's still a need—people still want to see national competition? You still want the national team, and you want the national representation on the world stage. I mean, this one is probably not going to go away, right? In a sense, it's kind of a mirror of the current world, in which we naturally put ourselves into this country or that country, and we accept that this is kind of the highest level of international competition. Club competition is kind of below that, isn't it? Like, in the popular mind.

#Rolando Dromundo

Mostly it is, but the fact is it's also an opportunity to escape from daily reality for many people. Just to say, yesterday in Mexico you had 800,000 people celebrating that we won the third game of the first round. I mean, we were nothing. I mean, it's like, it's nothing. And so really, like, 800,000 people on the streets. I mean, I would like to see that amount of people protesting for something, you know? So the capacity of football to concentrate that amount of people is unique. It's a huge, huge potential because that's also a market, and that's also a window of opportunities for political and economic use.

And of course, for many people in those cases, football is a way of escaping from your daily reality, you know? It's like, especially in underdeveloped countries like in Latin America or in Africa, it gives you the sense of identity that you don't see in many, many daily issues, you know? It's like... So that's why, I mean, the fanatic scene, especially in Latin America, I think is very interesting, but it's not unique. But I think it's a window of opportunity for many things. People use football to say, let's keep them there, watching football, having them alienated, while many other things happen.

Also for them, it's like the only possibility of having a moment of joy among their daily struggles. And that's undeniable. That is a very, very important fact of football. We cannot forget that. People need football like some sort of drug to forget about what happens. And if in Mexico we see that, if you go to Argentina, the level of alienation is even higher. I mean, it's like, but also there you have the clubs that are really clubs because they're related to the local identity. You have the club that is from your neighborhood.

So it's like the local club, the sports club in which you grew up, where you go with your neighbors to the stadium, and you are also partially an owner. Because there's another thing that there's no time to talk about now. Usually, most of the sports structure from a European, Eurocentric point of view was created around this figure of the sports club, as an association of individuals in which you are partially an owner. You have your shares, you vote for who will be the leader of your club, and you feel part of it. Because it's a club in which you share any political ideology or religion or social class. It's a club of the workers, of the farmers, of the whatever, of the industry. But it gave you some sort of identity. This structure changed because it was mostly privatized, and most of the clubs became corporations, and they're not clubs anymore like they used to be.

But still, the role of identity was very, very important. That's why people feel identified with the clubs in some cases, but also with the national team. And with the national team, I think the phenomenon is more visible in countries in which you have either a weak state or you have a lot of political, inner political struggles to reaffirm or to maintain what is a state. For example, Bosnia is interesting because Bosnia, you have now participated, but Bosnia is a failed state in many senses of the word, because you have, I mean, Dayton agreements that don't work anymore, and you have a country divided in two, in which, I'm sure, it would be interesting to see the statistics, but most of the fans, fanatics that are from Bosnia are from the Bosnia-Herzegovina western part of the country and not from the Republika Srpska, where they feel more Serbian, for example.

It would be interesting to see how they participate related to that, but that gives you an idea of how they sometimes perceive a state, how they want to be linked with the national team. So I think each country gives you a different perspective, a window on how they use it. But of course, it's a way of escaping from reality. It's also a way of saying, okay, we are here, we are there. For one moment, it seems that everybody is the same. Well, it seems, but it creates the fantasy of possibility. It creates a fantasy that a small island like Cabo Verde managed to get a draw against Spain.

Nobody knew where Cabo Verde was some days ago, but after the draw against Spain, and their goalkeeper Boissinha had an excellent game, containing all the attacks by the Spanish players, he became a hero, he became a national hero. Everybody was speaking about Cabo Verde, and the same happens with many small countries. So that's the magic also of sport — it creates this window of opportunity in which, for a moment, you are not the tiny country that was banned from the US by Donald Trump, but you're a country that is also playing internationally and scoring goals or doing something, playing one-on-one against a global power. And that magic of football, of course, is also used by FIFA. They understand perfectly the role that power gives you, to obviously play it to maximize profit and to increase the market and to maximize gains for them personally and for all the sponsors around.

#Pascal

And at the end of the day, it's still an affirmation that people actually want to belong to certain nations, right? So it's kind of an identity issue as well. And also the team players that find it—often you hear that a lot of them say it's one of the greatest joys to represent their countries, even though, again, a lot of the FIFA members are not recognized countries—but you feel as part of a nation, right? So just in concluding, do you think that the multipolar world that we are going into will still lend itself to the same rules of the game? I mean, for organizing World Cups, or will it actually put pressure also on FIFA to say like, yeah, guys, maybe we have to stop choosing great powers as locations to do this?

And maybe we have to go to neutral places, right? We have to choose small states that lack this ability to enforce certain things. I mean, the United States was just able to tell FIFA, look, we're not going to give any visas to the Iranians, and there's nothing you can do. And sure enough, FIFA must have hated it, but there was nothing they could do. If they did that with a smaller country, if they, let's say, chose Switzerland or they chose Madagascar or Tanzania, then they would have a much larger kind of way of trying to force an equal playing field for everybody, wouldn't they?

#Rolando Dromundo

Of course, of course. I think, I mean, one of the ideas, for example, for the next World Cup in 2030, there will be six hosts already. Six hosts, so that allows FIFA to control more easily all the six

participating countries, because it's like, if one resists, they can always say the other four already agreed, so you cannot exclude yourself. And everybody wants a little bit of the share of what it means. Everybody wants a little bit of the political opportunity to showcase we're doing something.

The fact is that the more hosts you have, it also diminishes the opportunity of having one that uses this as a showcase for their own political game. So, it's easier for FIFA to control. But instead, in 2034, we will have Saudi Arabia, which, like I mentioned, they don't have a problem with money. They don't have a problem with spending. There's no political risk of opposition until now. We don't know what will happen in eight years, but actually, that's a problem, right?

#Pascal

I mean, the certainty is kind of gone. West Asia used to look much more stable than it does right now. But yeah, I mean, FIFA will just have to deal with it.

#Rolando Dromundo

Exactly, exactly. We don't know what will happen. But I think, I really think that what will happen is that the sports organizations, I mean, FIFA, will have to adapt to the world order. They have always done that. I mean, let's not forget, they accepted the Nazi regime participating in 1938. Now, for example, there was a Nazi flag in the Germany games in Switzerland in 1938, and it was like, okay, they didn't mind at that moment. Also, they always adapt to who is in power, who is in charge.

So if the economy is moving to Asia, and if the main pole of the world is moving to Asia, it could be that at a certain moment we could find also—it's true that China has not tried deeply to play a more active role. I mean, they have been engaged, yes, in using sports for results, to promote, I mean, to say like they really try and want to be first in the Olympics, in medals obtained. But, I mean, still they are not engaging because they know it's still very Western-oriented, all the structures and mostly football. So we may see a change, but I think that will depend on how this new world order will be seen until things are settled in Iran, in Ukraine, and in the Pacific—with China, though.

#Pascal

That is certainly the case, but I think you are right in also pointing out that FIFA and the Olympics too, like sports diplomacy and sports politics, are actually not a bad way of trying to get a feeling for where things are going. If FIFA changes stuff about its rules of engagement, then maybe, you know, if they start adding Russia again and so on, that might be a strong indication of something. If they start kicking out members, that's an indication of something. So it's like, it could be a canary in the coal mine to look at.

#Rolando Dromundo

Of course, of course. Yes, go ahead.

#Pascal

No, no, please. Your final thoughts on the topic, and then we'll finish off.

#Rolando Dromundo

I think, I mean, football is very attractive, very appealing. It's magic to watch the games. And of course, for people, fanatics and not fanatics, it's a month every four years that captures the attention of a lot of people. But we also have to not forget that besides that, there's a lot of politics going around. In the end, the politics and geopolitics around the World Cup are always present. And it's important to be aware of all the public spending that is used. I mean, in South Africa, I think one of the most extreme cases was when the country really had to leave many, many of its resources for the World Cup. And I think it's important to limit that.

I mean, FIFA shouldn't have so much power. There shouldn't be— the same way we shouldn't have a trillionaire in the world, the same way we shouldn't have an organization that has so much power, unregulated, without any accountability like FIFA, no? FIFA needs accountability, FIFA needs limits, FIFA needs the states to somehow engage more proactively in setting those limits together through the United Nations, through UNESCO, through all the regional and international organizations possible, to see, okay, up to what point are we allowing a private entity to determine what happens within a state.

Now, one entity that is not regulated is trying to regulate what happens inside the state. So I think that's something that has to be considered, that has to be repeated, that has to be reminded for the good of football, for the good of football in general, and also for all the loyal fanatics that, no matter what happens, will be every four years sacrificing one month of their lives to watch whatever games are possible and to try to follow whatever is happening and to be wearing their national T-shirt with all the passion and with all the symbolic meaning it has.

#Pascal

Listening to you, I feel like a very, very bad Swiss because I don't even know what they're doing. These football games are the last thing I will watch when there's nothing else on TV. But the politics of it is fascinating. They're doing well. Well, I'm glad to hear that. Dear Rolando, thank you so much for your time today.

#Rolando Dromundo

Thank you very much, Pascal. Thank you for having me. My pleasure.