Sport and citizenship – thinking about contemporary trends and problems

Irena Slepičková

Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
irena.slepickova@ftvs.cuni.cz

ABSTRACT

This article is a reflection on what citizenship means today, how it can be generally characterized, and how it manifests itself in sport. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive overview of the topic based on a systematic review, but focuses on aspects that, according to the author, must be considered essential. Supranational organizations (the United Nations, the European Union) and states today talk about different forms of citizenship (global, active, national), but the literature points to possible controversies associated with the concept of citizenship in today's globalized and complex world where there is large-scale mobility of people between countries. For most authors, the core of citizenship lies in belonging, or a sense of belonging. This article discusses the main components of belonging and their potentiality for human life, and for sport, too. Citizenship is also viewed as multifaceted, and so its dimensions are distinguished (legal/political, social, cultural, and economic) and explained. Sport represents a specific area in understanding citizenship. Not all features of belonging or dimensions of citizenship play the same important role here. Elite sport and the sport of the ordinary population must be distinguished. In elite sport, the legal ties of athletes to society/the state dominate, while in community sport, other aspects of belonging play a role.

KEYWORDS

belonging; dimensions of citizenship; elite sport; sport immigration; community sport

DOI

10.14712/23366052.2026.4

INTRODUCTION

Sport has changed significantly in recent decades and has become an everyday part of the lives of societies and individuals around the world. Sport is practiced by the general public as a physical leisure activity or as passive entertainment in the form of spectatorship. For some participants, however, sport is a source of livelihood, their

work, their job. These are primarily elite athletes who compete at the highest level in an ever-expanding number of sports disciplines and types of competitions. The basic characteristics of sport include performance and success. If we consider these characteristics in relation to the general public and in relation to elite athletes, we find many differences. For the purposes of our discussion on citizenship and sport, we will focus primarily on elite sport.

Since sport has become a profession, and in some sports a very well-paid one at that, athletes and their support teams strive for success in competition, for fame, prestige, and money. This effort involves not only the athletes themselves, but also their closest associates (trainers, coaches, technicians, doctors, etc.). The desire to capitalize on the successes of teams or individuals permeates the activities of sports organizations, from large professional clubs to national sports federations, from small states to world powers. Presenting oneself as successful is the driving force behind elite sport in general, as well as for all those involved in its implementation (coaches, clubs, states, sponsors). Their success can represent political dominance and power, economic prosperity, or simply visibility in an interconnected global environment.

Of course, achieving the above goals is not possible without athletes. Having exceptional athletes in a club or national team who are capable of winning international competitions is a prerequisite for the success of a given sports club, sports federation, or country. For countries, successful representation in international sports is an important factor in strengthening their prestige and national pride. Labour migration in sports has become a reality around the world and affects not only foreign athletes playing in professional clubs, initially mainly in soccer and basketball, as published more than 30 years ago by Bale and Maguire (1994), but today in all sports.

For the reasons mentioned above, in recent decades we have witnessed wealthy countries recruiting and purchasing sports champions for their national teams. However, this migration of outstanding athletes cannot be viewed solely from the perspective of states and their policies. For many top athletes, changing the country they compete for is attractive and advantageous. They may seek better financial rewards for their 'sporting' work, better training conditions, an easier path to qualifying for major sporting events, or a more favourable political or cultural environment for their lives. We could cite a long list of athletes who have changed their citizenship for money, living and sporting conditions, love, or other reasons. Examples include the Brazilian footballer Mehmet Aurelio, who accepted Turkish citizenship, Cuban Vilfred León, who has become a prominent figure in the Polish volleyball team, and many others).

In today's global sport, the migration of top-level athletes is essentially based on the principle of supply and demand. At the club level, the situation is simpler. Athletes can play for a club abroad without having to change the citizenship of their country of origin. However, if migrating elite athletes decide to represent a country other than their native one, they must become citizens of their 'new' homeland, get its passport. National and international sports federations, including the International Olympic Committee, have had to address this phenomenon of athlete migration by creating appropriate rules and quotas for foreigners on teams. Gardiner and Welch (2016) document how general legal regulations also played a role in this process. In particular, the principle of free movement of labour for EU citizens (viz the Bosman case) has influenced professional sport not only in Europe but also around the world.

We should not overlook another aspect of citizenship that is not so visible, not presented in the media, and not so much perceived in everyday life. Being a citizen means being part of society and participating in a range of activities with other people. This aspect of sport concerns participation in sport at a level below the elite, in the sport of ordinary people. It represents active or passive sporting activity in various communities, such as local sports clubs, groups of friends, or fan groups. This social aspect of sport is also emphasized by the European Union in its important document, the White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007). It sets out a framework for sports policy and attributes to sport the potential to promote active citizenship (ibid., p. 6). Citizenship in the context of sport therefore does not only apply to top athletes, but is closely linked to people's everyday lives, where it can be seen as one of the tools contributing to the building of a prosperous society and good relations between its members.

This raises the foundational question: what does citizenship mean, how can it be generally characterized, and how does it manifest itself in contemporary sport? The aim of the following text is to provide a basic overview of this topic based on important documents and interesting published works by experts from various scientific fields, focusing more on reflections than on an exhaustive explanation of this multi-layered issue.

CITIZENSHIP – BASIC CONCEPTS

The topic of citizenship is important for human society and is discussed and approached from many angles. As a result of historical, social, and other changes that society is undergoing, the meaning of citizenship for individuals and various social groups, from the local to the global level, is gradually changing. It can be said that in today's complex and diverse world, which is seeking global solutions in various areas, we encounter different approaches. However, global and supranational organizations, in particular the United Nations (UN), are striving for a unified view of citizenship in the interests of mutual understanding between people and the prosperity and security of the whole world.

The UN talks about global citizenship and emphasizes the idea of democratic citizenship, enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2015). This document emphasizes that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' (UN, 2015, page v.) and applies to 'all people, at all times and in all places – people of all skin colours, races, and ethnic groups; regardless of whether they are disabled; citizens or migrants; regardless of their gender, class, caste, religion, age, or sexual orientation' (ibid., p. vi). In line with the intent of the document, it lists rights, not obligations, related to citizenship. Here we find the principles of good coexistence and cohabitation of all people and all nations living on Earth, with respect for the environment. This idea is wonderful, but the diversity of the world makes it difficult to implement.

For the purposes of our article, we consider it useful to refer to some of the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). These are:

'Article 13 (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State; (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.'

'Article 15 (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality; (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.'

'Article 20 (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.'

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is based on the idea of 'democratic' citizenship, which is linked to democratic attitudes and values that enable people, as democratic citizens, to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2025) 'strives to promote and share universal UN values such as tolerance, pluralism, respect for human rights, freedom, and dialogue'.

We also encounter other attributes of citizenship that mainly relate to social issues that need to be addressed. Hanemann (2019) provides a brief overview of some other attributes used for citizenship. 'Active' citizenship means that citizens are social actors and participate in civic affairs at the local, national, and global levels, think critically and creatively, and are responsible for their actions. She also talks about 'critical' citizenship, which means the need to seek new perspectives when addressing important issues and problems.

The term 'global citizenship' has emerged as a general and unifying concept. This global or world concept is discussed, for example, in Dower and Williams (2002) in which several authors show that the idea of global citizenship or world citizenship is highly controversial. For many authors of this publication, the idea of global citizenship is necessary and natural for the world of the 21st century, but others reject it as absurd. Both sides justify their position with meaningful arguments.

These conflicting views show how complex this area is. Global citizenship is an idea, a campaign, a movement, and a sense of belonging to a broader/global society that transcends geographical, political, and national boundaries (Haque, 2023). In the past (e.g., in the Roman Empire), dual citizenship was recognized. Among the empire's population, citizenship was associated with dual loyalties – one to the city and one to the state. This could cause unresolved conflicts (Follesdal, 2002). Perhaps certain parallels can be seen in relation to current discussions about the ideas of multiculturalism. Some argue that this is the future of humanity and the world, while others point to the failure of multiculturalism. But again, on the one hand, multiculturalism protects the diversity of the world, people, and their roots (cultural, geographical, etc.), while on the other hand, we see the danger of conflicts arising from this very diversity.

As Toukan (2018, p. 58) states, global citizenship does not refer to legal status. Rather, it refers to a sense of belonging to a wider community and shared humanity, promoting a 'global perspective' that connects the local with the global and the national with the international. It is also a way of understanding, acting and relating to others and the environment in space and time based on universal values, through respect for diversity and pluralism. In this context, every person's life has an impact on everyday decisions that connect the global with the local and vice versa. In connection with this definition, we would like to emphasize the aforementioned aspects of universal values and respect for diversity and pluralism.

To understand global citizenship, which we could call the 'highest' form of citizenship, we find Tukan's (2018) explanation of this concept useful. She analyzed UN and UNESCO documents focusing on the topics and principles of civic education.

She cites the work of Schultz (2007), who suggests that efforts toward global civic education often implicitly correspond to one of three overarching ideological agendas: neoliberalism (stressing the market economy, liberalism, capitalism, technology), radicalism (based on recognition and critique of existing inequalities and injustices and necessary moral responsibilities), or transformationalism(globalization is multifaceted along cultural, social, environmental, political and economic lines). In our opinion, these possible characteristics concern not only education in global citizenship, but also in citizenship in general. The last-mentioned ideological agenda speaks about the global citizen who 'understands herself or himself as intricately connected to people and issues that cross national boundaries' (Schultz, 2007, p. 249).

The existence of some universal global citizenship can be considered as very complicated and multifaceted. Simply said, global citizenship today is more of an idea than a reality, an idea that is essential for a peaceful and prosperous world. This idea wants to encompass the whole world and its various human communities, from the global, through the continental and national, to the local level, including, for example, sports associations. However, these communities may establish their own ideologies and values, which may not be entirely consistent with those that are globally recognized. This is because they are based on different histories, religions, cultures, etc.

BELONGING AS BASIC COMPONENT OF CITIZENSHIP

We can say with certainty that every person belongs to some community, large or small, with various attributes that are determined by different aspects. Belonging is connected with the lives of all people. It is also understood as a synonym for social identity or a sense of belonging. Raman (2014) defines belonging as 'the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment that makes people feels that they are an integral part of that system or environment'. It includes the feeling, belief, and expectation that an individual belongs to a group and has a place in it, feels accepted by the group, and is willing to sacrifice for it.

These groups and communities are established and exist according to various criteria, such as social, spatial, or professional. McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose defining a sense of belonging primarily from a psychological perspective. They state that it is based on four elements: membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional bond. Simply put, being a member of a community means having a sense of belonging or sharing a feeling of personal affiliation (relatedness) with others. The second element is a sense of mutual importance between the group and its individual members. The third element is based on so-called reinforcement, where members' needs are met by resources they obtain through their membership in the group. The shared emotional bond expresses the determination and conviction that members share and will continue to share history, common places, common time, and similar experiences.

Allen et al. (2021) discuss this topic in the same vein, citing the views of other authors that 'belonging is a fundamental human need that almost all people seek to satisfy'. At the same time, however, they point out that there is no consensus in the literature on the concept of belonging. They explain this by the different perspectives of the various scientific disciplines that deal with belonging (psychology, sociology, economics, and political science).

In summarizing these perspectives, belonging is rooted in the biologic nature of humans, represents a dynamic, emergent construct, and is usually associated with struggling to belong. The need for a sense of belonging may be just as important as food, shelter, and physical safety for promoting health and survival in the long run (ibid., p. 88). The authors continue their overview by noting that belonging exists within broadly defined dynamic social milieu, which provides an orientation for individuals to determine who and what is acceptable. Allen et al. (2021) also state that belonging is situational and emotionally influenced, can be variable depending on individual's experience, values and norms of a group where individual belongs or is struggling to belong. Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 199) takes a similar view when he says that people can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachment and that a sense of belonging can be defined as a feeling of well-being, security, connectedness, and respect.

But individuals do not always feel a sense of belonging. People can suffer from social isolation, a lack of contact with others, and loneliness. In today's society, social isolation is a trend across many developed cultures, caused by factors such as social mobility, technological advances, broken family and community structures, and the fast tempo of modern life. The desire to be part of a group that is 'mine', that accepts me and in which I feel comfortable, is particularly typical of minorities such as indigenous peoples, immigrants, but also other groups that do not belong to the majority (e.g., new members of a sports team). They preserve their culture, values, customs, and space and create their own groups and communities, which they perceive as 'us' versus 'them'.

Similarly, Haim-Litevski et al. (2023) analyze the literature on social belonging and community membership. They argue that every person has a basic need to be part of a larger group of individuals, and this feeling is based on the perception of how one relates to others or to the community. The quality of the relationship and the nature of mutual trust and reciprocity are emphasized. As a generalization of their findings, the authors state that the feeling of belonging and connectedness is a universal phenomenon that can be achieved in different ways in different communities.

Belonging and connectedness are thus understood as universal phenomena. However, we know that in human society it is common for people to belong to more than one social group; they can be members of many communities that differ according to various criteria (space, values, interests, etc.). These groups may honour even conflicting values, and conflicts of values may emerge both at the individual level and between groups.

Allen et al. (2021) consider belonging to be a dynamic feeling and experience that consists of four interconnected components and is supported by the environment in which individuals reside. The four components are (ibid., p. 91): '1) competencies for belonging (skills and abilities); 2) opportunities to belong (enablers, removal/reduction of barriers); 3) motivations to belong (inner drive); and 4) perceptions of belonging (cognitions, attributions, and feedback mechanisms – positive or negative experiences when connecting)'.

The terms we are discussing here, i.e. belonging, sense of community, and social connectedness are also closely related to concept of social cohesion. Šafr et al. (2008) examined theories, concepts, and analytical frameworks of social cohesion. They dis-

cuss accelerating social fragmentation in developed countries. Its manifestations can be observed in everyday life, whether it be a decline in voter turnout, civic engagement, membership in voluntary associations, growing cynicism in public affairs, or a decline in interpersonal trust. Membership and interpersonal trust represent some of the belongingness features we referred to above. In connection with this, we can also find one of the current reasons for the decline in interest in volunteer work in sports.

The lack of social cohesion (manifested in weak social ties, low solidarity, and weak roots in local communities) causes social problems and is more or less at the center of political attention. The decline in social cohesion and civic engagement and the increase in atomization are also caused by suburbanization or problematic urban areas. On the contrary, it leads to increased social cohesion within such communities. We can find very homogeneous communities, some of which are characterized by poverty and/or populated by immigrants and people who are returning to their original culture, with values, customs, and lifestyles that differ from those of the majority of the society that has accepted them. On the other hand, we find some protected residential areas for wealthy people who distance themselves from others not only with physical fences, but also with their lifestyle, which symbolizes, among other things, their closed-mindedness towards other groups of people. Both of these tendencies and others like them promote cohesion within these communities, but weaken cohesion at higher social and geographical levels, up to the level of the state or continent.

Today's society is very heterogeneous and diverse. Individuals belong to more groups at the same time, terminate their membership in some groups, or join other groups. This means that relationships within a group may not be as strong and lasting. In recent decades, we have witnessed large-scale migration around the world. The Declaration of Human Rights essentially states that people have the right to freely choose where they want to live. Thanks to the possibilities offered by today's transport infrastructure and the dynamic and constantly changing needs of the labour market, it is now possible to realize this choice. Many people take advantage of these opportunities, in particular to ensure greater security for themselves and their families, to improve their economic situation, or simply to change their environment and way of life.

In international terms, migration can be simply defined as a change of country of residence for an extended period of time. The United Nations (2024) reports, that relative migration is growing relatively slowly and is approaching 4% of the world's population. However, over the last three decades, the absolute number of migrants has doubled to 304 million worldwide (the world population is growing significantly, now exceeding 8 billion). People can live in a new country and retain their original citizenship, or they can obtain citizenship of the new country in which they reside. Whether they are granted new citizenship depends on many circumstances, both subjective and objective.

Many authors say (see above) that belonging is an integral part of citizenship. It can therefore be summarized that citizenship has very similar characteristics to belonging. We know that people can belong to different communities at the same time or over time, but they can also be excluded from some of them. Returning to the question of what citizenship means, it is important to consider what type of community we are talking about and which characteristics of belonging we are taking into account. Con-

cepts such as global citizenship, active citizenship, European Union citizenship, national citizenship, and city/municipality-level citizenship must be taken into account. This leads us to an understanding of citizenship as a multifaceted phenomenon that needs to be viewed from different angles.

DIMENSIONS OF CITIZENSHIP

Authors and institutions dealing with citizenship usually approach this topic with regard to its multidimensionality. Especially after World War II, the meaning of citizenship became broad and very complex. The specific questions that authors address from many different perspectives offer a range of explanations of what citizenship is and what characteristics express its essence. In the following section, we will present some of these views, which we consider sufficient to explain this concept.

Stokke (2017) pointed out that citizenship means not only legal status, but also cultural, social, and political status. He distinguishes four interconnected dimensions of citizenship: membership, legal status, rights, and participation. Membership is based on belonging to a particular community, on the distinction between insiders and outsiders, us and them; we briefly explained this in the previous text. Legal status includes both rights and obligations, confirmed by a contractual relationship between the individual and the state. We note that, in principle, it is expressed in the highest rule of the state, the constitution. The dimension of membership is particularly evident in relation to the state and the community. The author deals with direct and indirect participation of citizens in public affairs and active participation within civic communities. In our opinion, the author focuses primarily on the formal aspects of citizenship without including the diversity of belonging.

As stated by the Council of Europe (CE): 'Traditions and approaches to citizenship vary throughout history and across the world, according to individual countries, histories, societies, cultures, and ideologies, resulting in many different understandings of the concept of citizenship' (Council of Europe, 2023, p. 444). The document discusses four dimensions of citizenship, but in a different composition from Stokkes. In addition to the political/legal, social, and cultural dimensions, CE also includes the economic dimension.

Veldhuis (1997), who proposed taking these four dimensions into account in the above-mentioned document, based his approach on a number of definitions of citizenship. First, citizenship concerns the integration of individuals into the political framework and the participation of citizens in legal institutions; it is a contract between the individual and the state. Whether someone is a citizen or acquires citizenship depends on the political opinion of those who decide on it and set the relevant rules enshrined in legislation. Veldhuis, like other experts, draws on Marshall's concept. This British sociologist is considered one of the first to include socioeconomic rights in addition to legal and political rights.

According to Giubboni (2013), Marshall's classic definition of 'social citizenship' is based on the fundamental idea that social citizenship must be understood as the recognition of a 'universal right' to a real income that is not proportional to the market value of the applicant, and at the same time as a system of industrial citizenship based on organized collective work. Another characteristic of the social dimension concerns

relationships between individuals in society, which require loyalty and solidarity. His model also addresses the issue of social cohesion.

In her article on European citizenship, Mindus (2014) discusses the dimensions of citizenship. She also draws attention to the problem of marginalized or excluded persons who are foreigners or politically powerless. These people remain in an intermediate position between full integration and complete exclusion, which is called 'limited' citizenship. However, if we take into account social life and people's natural need to belong somewhere, we must consider this gradual dichotomy in the process of integrating individuals into the community or, conversely, in cases where the community considers some of its members to be undesirable. An individual may not be fully accepted by a group/community or may have problems respecting the values, rules, and norms of the group. The author concludes that since contemporary democracy is based on three pillars: the rule of law, the democratic state, and the social state, there are three dimensions of citizenship: legal, political, and social. We can conclude that her opinion is relevant primarily for lawyers, of which she is one.

The work of Velthuis (1997) and the Council of Europe (2023) highlights two further dimensions: cultural and economic. Cultural citizenship refers to an awareness of a shared cultural heritage. From a global perspective, however, we do not have a single world culture, a unified view of values, or the same emotional relationship to the geographical place where we live, which has its own history and significance. Today, multiculturalism is gaining ground in the world, significantly affecting some countries and continents. This is closely linked to migration, particularly when addressing issues of immigration from politically troubled and low-income countries. Society/the state must provide a set of values and rights that are not based on race. Immigration and the cultural dimension of citizenship are at the forefront of political activities aimed at integrating people from other cultures into society.

According to the Council of Europe document, the final dimension of citizenship, the economic dimension, concerns the individual's relationship with the labour market and the consumer market and includes the right to work and a minimum standard of living. Vocational qualifications and vocational training play a key role in fulfilling this economic dimension.

Cinalli and Jacobson (2021) reflect on the migration of people from countries with different cultures and religions to the West and its impact on the understanding of citizenship in these liberal societies. They state that, on the one hand, there are scholars (we could also add politicians/rulers) who consider the promotion of cultural differences to be compatible with national citizenship, but on the other hand, there are also those who argue that the cultural characteristics of newcomers are incompatible with a truly liberal understanding of citizenship (p. 33). They point to the consequences of the colonial era and postcolonialism as factors that strongly influence current approaches to citizenship issues. Many other authors address the relationship between citizenship and migration in order to understand this dynamically evolving phenomenon and contribute to its resolution in everyday practice (e.g. Castles & Davidson, 2000; Cinalli & Jacobson, 2021; Davidson, 2002; Kofman, 2005).

Although we have analyzed only a few sources dealing with citizenship, it can be summarized that the authors cited approach the issue of citizenship and its dimensions in a similar way. The legal dimension is usually presented as the basic starting

point. The political component is closely related to the previous one and is viewed in the context of political ideologies and types of public policy. The social dimension of citizenship represents the extent and manner in which an individual belongs to a community, which may vary in size and characteristics. This component is evident both at the level of larger social groups and, in particular, in smaller communities such as municipalities, sports clubs, and civic initiatives. This diversity can lead to certain controversies, which are then reflected in individuals' attitudes toward their own concept of citizenship or in how others perceive them as citizens and how they are accepted (integrated, isolated, excluded).

In the following section, we will look at how this is reflected in sport, whether it be elite sport or the sport of ordinary people in their everyday lives.

CITIZENSHIP AND SPORT

For the purposes of this document, we understand sport in the broadest sense, as defined in the White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007). European sports policy attributes to sport, among other things, a role in building and strengthening active citizenship: 'Participation in a team, principles such as fair play, compliance with the rules of the game, respect for others, solidarity and discipline, as well as the organization of amateur sport based on non-profit clubs and volunteering, reinforces active citizenship' (ibid., p. 6).

Theories of belonging consider participation to be its fundamental characteristic. Participation is inseparable from sport. Belonging to a group of people who play sports, are members of a sports club, or just spend time with fans of their favourite team – all of this stems from a sense of belonging, from the activities of people who form more or less formal groups. Theories of belonging consider participation to be its fundamental characteristic. Participation is inseparable from sport. Membership can therefore be very free and informal (fans) or it can take the form of an economic (professional athlete) or social (member of a voluntary association) contract.

Two levels of citizenship play an important role in sport. The first level concerns representing the state at international sporting events. These athletes are recognized citizens of the state and compete under its flag. The second level of citizenship concerns sporting communities, particularly those operating at the municipal level.

Legal/political sports citizenship

Most work in this area focuses on elite sport, particularly the legal level of sports citizenship. Oonk (2020) examines the relationship between nationality, citizenship acquisition, and migration. He focuses on the question: who can represent a nation? He notes that this question has been at the forefront of interest for the past 30 years. Given the changing perceptions of citizenship around the world and how it is rooted in the UN Charter on Civil Rights, it has been necessary to introduce new approaches to citizenship, migration, and identity in sport.

There are several ways to become a citizen of a particular country. Three interrelated paths to citizenship play a role here: jus sanguinis, jus soli, and jus nexi (e.g., Mindus, 2014). Jus sanguinis, or right of blood, is based on family ties (the citizenship of the athlete's parents or grandparents in various combinations). Jus soli refers to the

place of birth. Both forms are traditionally recognized symbols of citizenship and nationality. Oonk (2020) calls this ideal 'strong' citizenship. The combination of these two options offers the possibility of dual or multiple citizenship, allowing athletes to choose which country they want to compete for. Author gives examples of athletes competing for two countries in different sports during the same period or changing their national flag more times.

The last method of acquiring citizenship, jus nexi, reflects a specific person's ties to society. In sports, as in general, this means that athletes (applicants) have no prior relationship with the country they represent. Oonk (2020) calls this 'thin' citizenship. There are a number of reasons that lead to the acquisition of a new passport, other than that of the country of birth. Thin citizenship most often applies to migrants or athletes who have switched to another citizenship mostly for money.

There are many examples of athletes with high competitive abilities who have left their native countries and wear the national jersey of their new homeland. This is beneficial for both the state and the athletes. The state seeks to strengthen its international image, national pride, or promote interest in sports in its country. To this purpose, these countries have developed specific procedures for granting citizenship to foreigners in high demand, especially top athletes. The naturalization of elite athletes can be expedited by the state beyond the usual conditions set for other applicants by irrevocable legal requirements (length of stay and work activity, etc.). By acquiring new citizenship, athletes gain advantages, particularly economic and social ones (higher financial rewards, better training conditions, easier qualification for top sporting events. In some cases, athletes leave their country of origin for security reasons (they feel threatened by the political system or ongoing armed conflict) or for more prosaic reasons, such as marriage to a citizen of the new country. However, the naturalization of elite athletes does not necessarily lead to their identification with their new country or nation. On the other hand, the inhabitants of their new homeland may not accept these new representatives due to ethnic and cultural differences. For example, Han et al. (2023) analyzed Chinese nationalism and national identity in the case of naturalized elite soccer players for the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup.

The three proposed categories of sports citizenship (Oonk, 2020) are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. The strongest form is based on the right of birth, origin, and contribution to the state through political activity, work, and compliance with the country's rules. This is followed by two 'intermediate' levels. The stronger form requires either ancestors or place of birth in the country. For ordinary migrants and persons interested in resettlement, the situation is more complicated because they must live in the country for a certain period of time, usually 5, 7, or 8 years depending on the legislation of the new country, participate in integration courses, etc. Thin citizenship in sport abolishes all these criteria and is simply a business.

In the case of sports citizenship, the borders defining a country's territory still play a dominant role. But tendency to switching sport nationality is growing (Jansen, 2018). International sports organizations must therefore address the definition of citizenship and require athletes to meet certain conditions in order to represent a particular country. An interesting situation arose, for example, after the collapse of the former socialist bloc countries. New states were established, new laws on the granting of citizenship were adopted, and citizens had to choose a new citizenship. Newly established national

sports organizations had to apply for membership in international sports organizations (Slepičková, 2011). This has led to an increase in the number of national teams and greater competitive pressure among elite athletes and states at international sporting events.

Community sports citizenship

When we talk about legal citizenship, we see that not all citizens necessarily identify with their country and are willing to accept and fulfil their responsibilities towards the whole. This is closely related to today's issues of migration or citizens with a migrant background, especially in some Western European countries. Ethnic reasons and historical contexts may also play a role. Identification with the state is weaker than identification with a community defined culturally, religiously, geographically, or politically. Belonging to this community may therefore play a stronger role than holding a state passport. In sports, for example, the national soccer teams of Wales, Scotland, and England compete separately at the international level; there is no team for the entire United Kingdom. Similarly, autonomous regions such as the Basque Country protect their identity. The Athletic Bilbao soccer team consists exclusively of players from the Basque Country, which means that they must be born there or have Basque parents. Examples show that the strength of the sense of belonging can thus decline from the state level and intensify to individual communities or social groups operating at the regional and local levels.

Many authors have addressed the topic of belonging, its essence and characteristics, as we mentioned in one of the previous sections. In general, an individual should be an acceptable and accepted member of a particular community or social group, respecting its norms, values, and formal and informal rules. We agree with Allen's (Allen et al., 2021) distinction between the components of belonging when discussing citizenship. These include competencies, opportunities, motivation, and perceptions of belonging. People in sports groups, whether formal or informal, whether actively participating in sports (athletes) or just watching (fans), join sports communities, seek acceptance and participation in group activities, form social and emotional bonds, share successes or defeats, and enjoy the time spent with other members.

Having national citizenship gives an individual the right to also be a citizen of a specific municipality, since almost everyone has a permanent residence somewhere. Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 20 attributes to people the right to peaceful assembly and the formation of associations (UN, 2015). The primary place for practicing sport is the municipality/city, which supports sport not only in developed but increasingly also in developing countries, e.g. South Africa (Burnett, 2006). In Europe, sports associations/clubs are the main promoters of sport as civic organizations committed to contributing to the public good. Associations create space not only for sporting activities, but also for social gatherings. Thanks to the values shared by people involved in sport, they understand each other better and are then able to engage constructively in other issues related to community life. Sport at the local level is thus one way in which people learn citizenship and put it into practice.

People can become members of the local community by participating in civic activities, including sports. This principle applies to the integration of citizens in general, but especially in relation to socially marginalized groups and migrants. For many years, inclusive programs have been developed and implemented, especially in Europe, and specifically for immigrants (Ehnold et al., 2023; Mignon, 2000; Stone, 2018 and oth-

ers). Sometimes even top athletes coming from abroad or of different cultural/ethnic background have difficulty gaining recognition from and integrating into the local or national community, as demonstrated by Bant and van Lankveld (2025) using the example of Dutch Caribbean migrants playing baseball and softball, who are in fact Dutch nationals by birth.

There are also cases where immigrants distance themselves from their new community (municipality, state). They create their own closed ethnic communities and prioritize the values, customs, and norms of their country of origin. Different cultures and ideologies can clash through sport. In Australia, for example, it was necessary to address violence between fans from hostile states of the former Yugoslavia who supported their 'national' players in rival Australian teams (Hallinan et al., 2007). A similar example is the strong Turkish community in Germany. In recent decades, many Turks have moved to Germany for work and obtained German citizenship. Nevertheless, they probably still retain a strong sense of belonging to their country of origin and its culture and express this in their sports fandom. After Turkey defeated the Czech Republic 2-1 in the 2024 European Football Championship in Germany, Turks celebrated throughout Germany and chanted the name of the Turkish president [eyewitness account]. International soccer matches often became the scene of clashes between spectators supporting their national teams, who thus expressed their national solidarity. This was the case, for example, in the war between El Salvador and Honduras in the late 1960s (Slepička et al., 2010).

In this context, it is interesting to note that fans usually have a very strong connection to their team and are proud to be citizens of the city where their team plays. On the other hand, in today's professional sports, we are witnessing significant turnover among top sports employees. Clubs are very actively selling and buying athletes and changing the composition of their teams in order to achieve the greatest possible success. Many athletes, especially in team sports, move from club to club. Such frequent changes in sports social groups or transitions from a different cultural environment do not contribute to building lasting relationships with other team members; they do not promote a sense of belonging to the place where they are currently employed. Such situations can also weaken the fans' sense of belonging. It depends on the club's marketing how fans will accept these changes (Crossan, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This article was not based on a systematic analysis of knowledge about citizenship and sport. The aim was to identify what we consider to be the main key topics and to emphasize the multifaceted nature of both concepts – citizenship and sport.

We see that sport reflects the global situation of increasing migration of people from one country to another. It is not just about the movement of people, but also the movement of goods, money, and capital associated with sport; all of this shows the current state of sport. Especially when commerce became involved in elite sport in the 1960s (Diegel, 1995), the issue of changing athletes' citizenship began to gain importance. In elite sport, this has primarily become a legislative issue.

In accordance with the International Olympic Committee, international sports federations approve and enforce rules that determine the conditions under which

athletes can change their citizenship and participate in the world's top competitions. When it comes to sport for ordinary citizens, other aspects of citizenship based on a sense of belonging are particularly important, although to some extent they also occur in elite sport. Many people participate in sport in various sports communities, formal and informal, temporal and permanent. Members of these groups also spend time together outside of sport and share other common experiences. Sport thus provides an opportunity for integration into community life.

On the other hand, it can also lead to the establishing of groups that are significantly different from each other, with different cultures and values. We mentioned programs that help integrate migrants into the majority society through sports, but also that they can lead to results opposite to those intended. However, differences between groups, their complete separation from one another, can also be found, for example, among fans of two rival teams from the same city (in Czech football, FC Sparta Praha versus SK Slavia Praha) or in clubs with high membership fees that only wealthy people can afford (e.g., golf). The relationship between citizenship and sport reflects the complexity of both concepts. However, it is important to note that this relationship is still shaped by geographical aspects, border aspects, whether these are national borders or borders defining cities or municipalities.

The issue of citizenship and nationality in elite sports has attracted considerable interest from researchers and sports policymakers. In our view, however, it is necessary to explore the role of citizenship in sports within communities and municipalities more deeply, not just among groups of migrants or people living on the margins of society. Overcoming controversies should lead to fulfilling the ideal of citizenship expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to active citizenship in today´s dynamically changing world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Special Issue was supported by a 4EU+ Alliance project "Strengthening citizenship through sport", grant no. MA/4EU+/2024/F2/07, coordinated by Assoc. Prof. Irena Slepičková. This article was written with the institutional support of Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic, from Cooperatio (Sport Sciences – Social).

REFERENCES

Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: a review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *73*(1), 87–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409.

Bant, J., & van Lankveld, M. (2025). Baseball in the Netherlands: New Perspectives on Representation and Belonging in Europe. *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture*, *33*(2), 95–108. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nin.2025.a951273.

Bale, J., & Maguire, J. (Eds.) (1994). *The Global Sports Arena: Athletic Talent Migration in an InterpendentWorld.* Frank Cass Publishers.

Bellamy, R. (2008). *Citizenship: a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780192802538.003.0001.

Burnett, C. (2006). Building social capital through an active community club. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *41* (3–4), 283–294.

Castles, S., & Davidson, A. (Eds.). (2000). *Citizenship and Migration: Globalization and the Politics of Belonging* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003061595.

Cinalli, M., & Jacobson, D. (2021). Chapter 23: The multiple dimensions of citizenship and the postnational turn. In: M. Guiny & M. Grasso (Eds.), *Handbook of Citizenship and Migration*. 347–360. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789903133.00033.

Council of Europe (2023). *Compass Manual for Human Rights Education with Young people. Second edition.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Council of Europe (1975). *European Sport for All Charter*. Brussels. https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09000016804de707.

Council of Europe (2025). Citizenship and Participation. Retrieved from: https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/citizenship-and-participation.

Crossan, W. (2024). *Czech Sport Migration Push and Pull Variations Between Sports and Cultures.* Prague: Karolinum.

Davidson, A. (2002). Citizenship and Migration: Globalization and the Politics of Belonging. *Economic Geography*. https://doi.org/10.2307/4140816.

Diegel, H. (1995). *Sport in a changing society.* Schordorf: Hofmann.

Dower, N., & Williams, J. (Eds.) (2002). *Global Citizenship: A Critical Introduction* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315023595.

Ehnold, P., Jarck, H., Doherty, A., Elmose-Østerlund, K., Fahlén, J., Gohritz, A., Ibsen, B., Nagel, S., Seippel, Ø., Stenling, C., Strandbu, Å., Taylor, T., Vögtli, S., & Schlesinger, T. (2023). Developing a multi-level framework for analyzing public sports-based programmes to integrate migrants and refugees into organized sports. *Sport in Society*, *27*(7), 983–1003. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2276813.

European Commission (2007). *White paper on spor*t. Brussels.

Follesdal, A. (2002). Citizenship: European and Global. *SSRN Electronic Journal.* https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1752162.

Gardiner, S., Welch, R. (2016). Nationality Based Playing Quotas and the International Transfer System Post-Bosman. In: A. Duval & B. Van Rompuy (Eds.), *The Legacy of Bosman.* ASSER International Sports Law Series. T.M.C. Asser Press, The Hague. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-120-3_4.

Giubboni, S. (2013). *European Citizenship, Labour Law and Social Rights in Times of Crisis. Working Paper.* Centro Einaudi, N2, ISSN 2036-1246.

Haim-Litevsky, D., Komemi, R., & Lipskaya-Velikovsky, L. (2023). Sense of Belonging, Meaningful Daily Life Participation, and Well-Being: Integrated Investigation. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, *20*(5), 4121. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054121.

Hallinan, C., Hughson, J., & Burke, M. (2007). Supporting the 'World Game' in Australia: A Case Study of Fandom at National and Club Level. *Soccer in Society*, *8*(2/3), 283–297.

Han, P., Tang, S., & Bairner, A. (2023). Citizenship without identity? Instrumentalism, nationalism and naturalization in Chinese men's football. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *59*(2), 258–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902231199580 (Original work published 2024).

Hanemann, U. (2019). *Global citizenship and adult literacy*. UIL (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning) and APCEIU (UNESCO Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding). Paper commissioned for the 2019 UIL/APCEIU publication. https://www.uil.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/03/uhglobal_cit_adult_lit.pdf?hub=156.

Haque, D. T. (2023). Global citizenship and role of polyglot in its strengthening. *Sprint Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, *2*(3), 31–35. https://doi.org/10.55559/sjaes.v2i03.50.

Jansen, J. (2018). Nationality swapping in the Olympic Games 1978–2017: A supervised machine learning approach to analysing discourses of citizenship and nationhood. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *54*(8), 971–988.
Kofman, E. (2005). Citizenship, Migration and the Reassertion of National Identity. *Citizenship Studies*, *9*(5), 453–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020500301221.
McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *14*(1), 6–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I.
Mignon, P. (2000) Sport, insertion, intégration. *Hommes & migrations*, *1226*(1), 15–26. hal-02045040.
Mindus, P. (2014). Dimensions of Citizenship. *German Law Journal*, *15*(5), 735–749. https://doi:10.1017/S2071832200019118.
Oonk, G. (2022). Sport and nationality: towards thick and thin forms of citizenship. *National Identities*, *24*(3), 197–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2020.1815421.
Raman, S. (2014). Sense of Belonging. In: A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research.* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2646.
Shultz, L. (2007). Educating for global citizenship: conflicting agendas and understandings. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *53*(3), 248–258.
Slepička, P. et al. (2010). *Divácká reflexe sportu*. Praha: Karolinum.
Slepičková, I. (2011). The transition in Central and Eastern European sport. In: C. Sobry, (Ed.), *Sports Governance in the World A Socio-Historic Approach. Volume II.* Le Manuscript. 11–38. EAN 9782304038729.
Stokke, K. (2017). Politics of citizenship: Towards an analytical framework. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift – Norwegian Journal of Geography*, *71*(4), 193–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/00291951.2017.1369454.
Stone, C. (2018). Utopian community football? Sport, hope and belongingness in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. *Leis. Stud.*, *37*(2), 171–183.
Šafr, J., Bayer, I., & Sedláčková, M. (2008). Sociální koheze. Teorie, koncepty a analytická východiska. *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, *44*(2), 247–269. ISSN 0038-0288.
Toukan, E. (2018). Educating citizens of 'the global': Mapping textual constructs of UNESCO's global citizenship education 2012–2015. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, *13*(1), 51–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197917700909.
UNESCO (2025). Democracy and Global. https://www.unesco.org/en/democracy-and-global-citizenship.
United Nations (2015). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf.
United Nations (2024). *International Migrant Stock 2024: Key facts and figures*. UN DESA/POP/2024/DC/NO. 13.
Veldhuis, R. (1997). *Education for Democratic Citizenship: Dimensions of Citizenship, Core Competencies, Variables and International Activities.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe, document DECS/CIT (97) 23.
Worster, T. W. (2024). Respecting the Right to Nationality in International Sport. In: V. Boilet, S. Weerts & A. R. Ziegler (Eds.), *Sports and Human Rights Conference proceedings*. Springer, 149–186.
Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *40*(3), 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331.