



## Country Profile of Slovenia: Sport Policy System in a Small State

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## Country Profile of Slovenia: Sport Policy System in a Small State

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### ABSTRACT

The profile provides an overview of the contemporary sport policy system in the small, and relatively young, state of Slovenia. The paper begins by outlining some of the specific characteristics of Slovenia which provide important contextual understanding. A brief overview of the historical development of sport in Slovenia after gaining independence in 1991 is also included. Next, a detailed description of the contemporary structure of the sport policy system in Slovenia is provided, including relevant organisational and financial structures. The paper then discusses some of the specificities of the Slovene context that have also influenced the contemporary sport policy system including characteristics of scale, culture, and the natural environment. Finally, the paper concludes by highlighting the contextual factors that may be relevant to the future of the sport policy system in Slovenia.

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## Introduction

Slovenia is a relatively young state having only gained independence in 1991 (Hansen 1996). In addition to its youth Slovenia is also categorised as a small state (Thorhallsson 2006), with around two million citizens (Statistični urad Republike Slovenije, 2016), a geographic area of 20,273 km (Cecić Erpič, 2013) and a GDP of €46.918.000.000 in 2020 (Eurostat 2022). Despite these size-related constraints where it applies that 20% of sporting success at elite level is determined by population size (Shibli *et al.* 2014) and 41.6% of the medal success at the Olympic Games is accounted for by population, wealth and political structure of a country (De Bosscher *et al.* 2015), the Slovene sport system can be considered effective at both elite and recreational levels. This is because Slovenia generally places high in terms of relative medal rankings per capita at the Olympic Games as demonstrated in comparison to its neighbouring countries (Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy), countries similar in population size (Estonia, Latvia) and ex-Yugoslav countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) in Table 1. Furthermore, Slovenes are one of the most physically active nations in the European Union (EU) (European Commission 2010, 2014). With 15% of residents *exercising or doing sports on regular basis*, Slovenes ranked second in the EU, after Ireland at 16%, whilst Bulgaria ranked the lowest at 2% (European Commission 2014). Slovenia also had the fourth lowest proportion of citizens (22%) who *never exercise or play sport* (European Commission 2010, 2014), only surpassed by Finland, Denmark and Sweden at 15%, 14% and 9% respectively (European Commission 2014).

Consequently, whilst size does matter, Sam (2015) argues that despite the drawback of size, small states have developed some unique adaptive and beneficial features to overcome the resultant

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**Table 1.** Medal rankings per capita at the most recent Olympic Games (Nevill-Manning, 2022).

	Beijing 2022	Tokyo 2020	Pyeongchang 2018	Rio 2016
Slovenia	2 <sup>nd</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>
Austria	3 <sup>rd</sup>	31 <sup>st</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	64 <sup>th</sup>
Croatia	N/A	12 <sup>th</sup>	N/A	6 <sup>th</sup>
Hungary	14 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	21 <sup>st</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>
Italy	15 <sup>th</sup>	35 <sup>th</sup>	18 <sup>th</sup>	37 <sup>th</sup>
Estonia	8 <sup>th</sup>	15 <sup>th</sup>	N/A	26 <sup>th</sup>
Latvia	11 <sup>th</sup>	22 <sup>nd</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	N/A
Bosnia and Herzegovina	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Kosovo	N/A	21 <sup>st</sup>	N/A	33 <sup>rd</sup>
Macedonia	N/A	42 <sup>nd</sup>	N/A	N/A
Montenegro	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Serbia	N/A	25 <sup>th</sup>	N/A	15 <sup>th</sup>

challenges because ‘each country faces different circumstances, and structure and procedures must be adapted to fit the goals, cultures of individual societies’ (Bray 1991, p. 11). Indeed, as the capacity for strategic development in small states is highly constrained, shifting the focus onto which resources are possessed and how these can be utilised effectively in the most efficient way is crucial (Houlihan and Zheng 2015).

Thus, the aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the historical development of the contemporary Slovene sport policy system and the dominant influences on the system including structural and cultural characteristics. The paper contributes to the limited research regarding the organisation and operation of national sport systems (Andersen and Ronlan 2012), particularly in states with a population of less than five million (Sam and Jackson 2015) and enhances the understanding of sport policy systems in this distinctive group of states (Houlihan and Zheng 2015).

The data for this paper were derived from a broader study which sought to examine and account for the development of the existing elite sport system within Slovenia. The study involved documentary analysis of 43 sport policy documents and qualitative interviews with six key stakeholders within sport in Slovenia.

### Historical development of Slovene sport (system)

Sport policy systems are limited by, and are a product of, the context within which they exist (Houlihan 2013) and their development is therefore country specific, complex and continuous (Barker-Ruchti *et al.* 2018). Prior to its independence, Slovenia was a part of Yugoslavia for seven decades since being established in 1918 (Singleton and Carter 1982). Therefore sport in Yugoslavia has influenced the development of the sport policy system in contemporary Slovenia. A brief overview of historical development of Yugoslav sport is therefore provided for context and to aid understanding of the development of the contemporary sport policy system in Slovenia.

As a political entity, Yugoslavia went through two major stages of development. From 1918 to 1941 it was a monarchical system (Velikonja 2002), then after being occupied during World War II (Velikonja 2002, Čepič *et al.* 2005), it became the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Singleton 1976, Prout 1985). The Federation included six republics; Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, and two autonomous provinces; Kosovo and Vojvodina (Prout 1985). The Federation adopted a communist regime (Vucinich 1969, Ramet 2006) based on decentralisation and self-management, which came to be known as socialism with a human face (Ramet 2006). Due to the democratic movements in the 1980s (Velikonja 2002), the era of the Yugoslav Federation ended for Slovenia in 1991 (Hansen 1996). Thus, in the last thirty years, Slovenia transitioned from a communist-oriented republic to a democracy-oriented settlement, leading to changes in all social domains, including sport.

Throughout the era of Yugoslavia, sport was a priority. In fact, even prior to the establishment of Yugoslavia as a nation-state, sport was used as a vehicle for militarisation (Rohdewald 2011) and for nation-building (Riordan, 1999). Athletic movements called *Sokols* were central to nation-building in the multi-ethnic population functioning as a promotional tool of national and political projects and identities (Riordan, 1999). *Sokols* were considered an important Pan-Slavic movement that used physical activity (gymnastics) to unite Slavic nations against continually growing Germanisation (Šugman 1991, Godnič 2005). The establishment of the first Slovene sports club – *Južni Sokol* – dates back to 1863 (Pavlin 2000, 2008, Žvan 2014, Jurak 2017). *Južni Sokol* was considered a major stepping stone in the development of Slovene physical education and culture in general (Žvan 2014), and marks the ‘beginning of the general organisation of physical activities in Slovenia’ (Jurak 2017, p. 223).

The importance of *Sokols* intensified in order to build Yugoslavs’ national identity with sport contributing to the building of a strong nation state (Rohdewald 2011). In 1929, King Alexander proclaimed his dictatorship and imposed a Law on the *Sokol* of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia thereby nationalising *Sokols* (Pavlin 2014a). The new organisation continued the role of previous *Sokols* (Pavlin 2014b) only now it had ‘a legal basis and was financed from the [federal] budget’ (Pavlin 2008, p. 8). Hence, this marks the first interference of the state in the sport sector in Slovene history. The new Law prioritised mass participation (nowadays recreation) and marginalised elite sport, as mass participation was seen to be an important factor in national stability, enlightening of the public and militarisation of society (Pavlin 2000, 2014a). Nevertheless, as Riordan (1999) explains, patriotism aligned to sporting success was integrated through the system funded by the government to provide conditions for discovering, organising and developing talent in sport with an emphasis on Olympic success. Sport was for the masses and open to talents in all sports with opportunities for women and ethnic minorities.

In the Federal Yugoslavia, the *Sokol* movement was dissolved and substituted by *physical culture*<sup>1</sup> to comply with the new Communist regime (Pavlin 2008, 2011). In 1947, the first Slovene Constitution declared the republic in charge of all physical activities (Čuček 2015). This initiated a long period of decentralisation in Yugoslavia. During the 1950s *physical culture* became an integral part of the nation-development reflecting the belief that there is no quality of life without physical exercise (Pavlin 2010). The growing tensions between recreation and elite sport were however becoming the biggest organisational challenge (Čuček 2015). Following the 1963 Constitution, competences in *physical culture* were carried over to the republic level (Kustec-Lipicer 2007) and municipalities (Čuček 2015). The federal state lost all its competencies in this area in 1971 and the Yugoslav Association of Physical Culture and Yugoslav Olympic Committee remained the only sport organisations at the federal level (Šugman 1999). Thus, at the federal level the control was focused on elite sport, whereas *physical culture* or mass participation sports were in the hands of the republics.

In 1972, local self-government units were established in Slovenia as a form of sport nationalisation which aimed to provide (1) a more structured funding source; (2) partial autonomy of sport from the state; (3) improved management of sports infrastructure; (4) increase in research and education of personnel; and (5) success of elite athletes and recognition of recreational sport (Šugman, 1997). Hence in 1974, the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia offered a complete definition of *physical culture* and rooted this within the social environment, whilst also implementing the subsidy of sport (ibid.). It enabled internal distribution of funding for sporting organisations and thus provided them with a greater authority (Čuček 2015). Following the 1974 Constitution, Slovenia aimed to develop a sports model that would enable sport to become an essential part of Slovene culture as a result of the freedom of participation principle as at the time, the sports system in Slovenia was based primarily on pre-school and school institutions (Šugman 1998). The results in elite sport were important but not at any cost, nevertheless elite athletes were given several rights with the legal recognition of the elite athlete’s status; (1) accident insurance along with pension and disability insurance; (2) bursaries, scholarships and supplements for food; (3) the rights for curriculum adaptation in education; and (4) remuneration and rewards for sporting achievements (ibid.).

The dissatisfaction of Slovenes with the Yugoslav regime in the 1980s resulted in their pursuits for a democratic independent country (Hansen 1996). Slovenia actively tried to gain international recognition by becoming a member of various international alliances but sport also remained a highly valued vehicle to promote the Slovene state as success offered opportunities to be in the international limelight (Riordan, 1999). Many newly independent states used sport for fostering national awareness and interests, and while integrating in the European space (Rohdewald 2011). In fact, many post-Communist countries utilised sport to promote national identity and positively impact economic and social development, and many Slovenes still believe sport is valuable in national identity-building among citizens and in the international context (Topic and Coakley 2010).

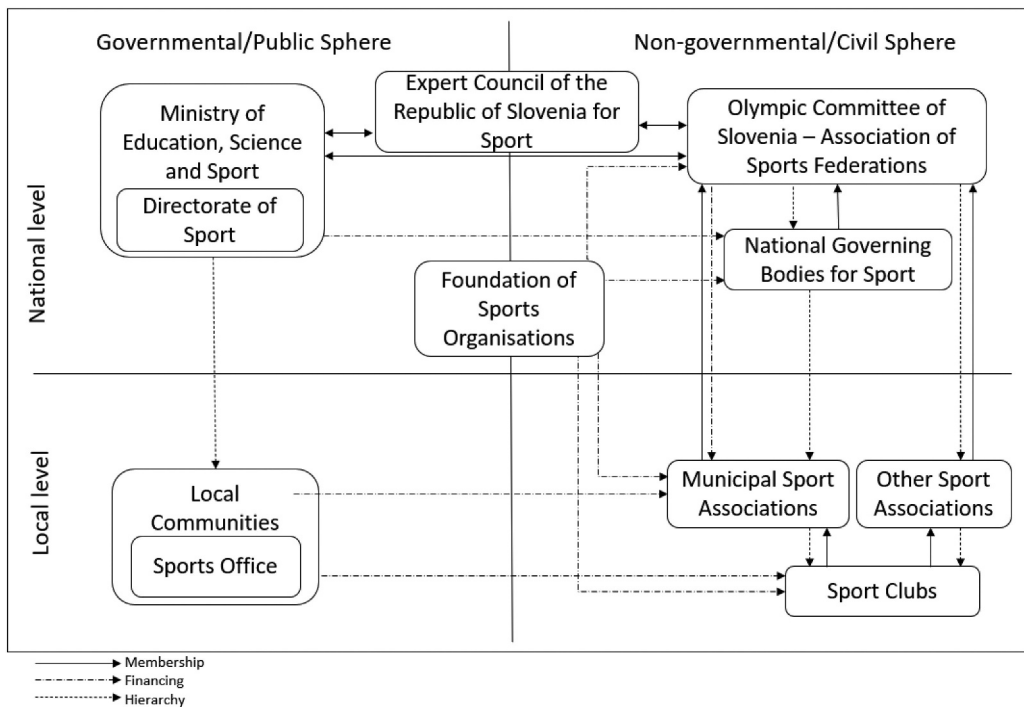
Prior to independence, in 1989, two major projects were undertaken, the Sports Act (Law on Sport) and the National Programme of Sport of the Republic of Slovenia (NPS) that would define financing of the sport programmes by the government (Šugman 1999). The Sports Act was rejected by the Sport Association of Slovenia (SAS), previously known as the Slovene Association of Physical Culture, in 1994 (Pavlin 2011) and finally accepted in March 1998 (*Zakon o športu*, 2017). The rejection of the Act by the SAS highlights the interlinking of public and non-governmental sport sectors in contemporary Slovenia. Furthermore, following the transitional period (1 April 1990–23 December 1991), the management of sport fell under the SAS (Pavlin 2011). In October 1991, the Olympic Committee of Slovenia (OCS) was founded (Šugman 2011), whilst SAS made calls for Slovene sport organisations to begin desegregation with their Yugoslav partners and to join the international sport federations (IFs) instead, including the IOC (Pavlin 2011). OCS became a permanent member of the IOC on 5 February 1992 just in time for the Winter Olympics in Albertville, which was of great importance as it enabled Slovene athletes to participate under the Slovene flag (Šugman 1999). Organizational changes in Slovene sport continued well after the proclamation of the independence, when in 1992, SAS and OCS decided to restructure the organisation of the civil sphere in sport and unite as one organisation (Šugman 1999, 2011). It was not until December 1994 that the new non-governmental or civil central authority for sport in Slovenia was founded and named the Olympic Committee of Slovenia – Association of Sports Federations (OCS-ASF) (Šugman 1999).

Throughout the Yugoslav era, Slovene athletes reaped international successes mainly in individual summer and winter sports, such as gymnastics, skiing, ski jumping, Nordic skiing and basketball (Čuček 2015). Sports disciplines in which Slovenes were surpassing other Yugoslav republics became regarded as Slovene national sports (Stepišnik 1968).

## Contemporary organisational structure of the sport policy system in Slovenia

Figure 1 outlines the organisation of the contemporary Slovene sport system. In Slovenia, the main responsibility for sport sits within the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MESS) which 'is responsible for the networking activities of all actors while being helped by government agencies' (NPS, 2014, p. 56). Here, the link between schools and sport is evident in the organisational structure, where the MESS represents and joins together education and sport (NPS, 2014). Indeed, 66% of physical activity in Slovenia is delivered through physical education in schools (Jurak 2010) serving as a foundation for participation for children and youth and as the first pillar for success in international sport (Horvat 2020). These links have a long history of alignments having originated during the Yugoslav times.

The Minister of MESS has the power to establish the Expert Council of the Republic of Slovenia for Sport, which sits within the Slovene Parliament as an advisory body on sport policy comprising of sports experts, elite athletes, and professional workers in sport (*Zakon o športu*, 2017). Furthermore, within MESS sits the autonomous Directorate of Sport whose role is to coordinate and ensure the delivery of the state-level tasks as defined in the Sports Act and the NPS, including co-financing of sport and enabling the undisrupted functioning of sports organisations (NPS, 2014). Besides the MESS, there is the OCS-ASF operating as a civil umbrella association of sport that links together



**Figure 1.** The organisation of the Slovene sport system. *Note.* Adapted from Jurak (2017, p. 229), NPS (2014) and Zakon o športu (2017).

national governing bodies (NGBs), municipal sport associations and other sports organisations, while it is also a member of the international Olympic movement (*Zakon o športu*, 2017). Therefore, OCS-ASF represents sport at all levels, which is another structural characteristic with origins in Yugoslavia dating back to the time of decentralisation and self-management (Stepišnik 1968). In Slovenia, sport consists of public and civil spheres, with the public sphere representing the government, and the civil sphere the NGBs, sports clubs, athletes etc. and therefore these may promote different interests. The OCS-ASF oversees recreational and elite sport, but elite sport is not delivered by the OCS-ASF which is instead delivered through national teams of NGBs and sports clubs. The NGBs have the freedom to adopt the policies and redistribute allocated funding in line with their own priorities and preferences (Horvat 2020).

Furthermore, Slovenia is one of the countries that adopts a Sports Act (Camy *et al.* 2004) as a systematic approach to sports development. The first Sports Act came into force in 1998 (*Zakon o športu*, 1998), seven years after the independence of Slovenia in 1991, yet its preparation started before independence (Šugman 1999). In 2017, the Sports Act was revised and adapted. The Sports Act of 2017 is underpinned by several general principles which state that the sport policy system should provide:

- Opportunities for every resident of the Republic of Slovenia to participate in sport irrespective of their gender, race, social status, religion, language and nationality or any other personal circumstance
- Opportunities for participation in quality sport in a safe and healthy environment
- Safe sport and the strengthening of moral and ethical values and avoidance of unfair achievement of results (doping, match fixing)
- Sports heritage conservation care<sup>2</sup>

- Sustainable development<sup>3</sup>
- Promotion of sporting behaviour<sup>4</sup> (*Zakon o športu*, 2017)

The Sports Act defines the public interest in the field of sport, mechanisms for its implementation, responsible bodies, conditions for expert work in sport, athletes' rights, public sports facilities and outdoor natural sports areas, sports events, databases and monitoring in sport (*Zakon o športu*, 2017). The Sports Act provides guidelines on the governance and regulation of sport in Slovenia. It also provides the basis for the NPS – a 10-year strategic document for the development planning of sport that also defines the public interest in sport (*ibid.*). Whilst the ground work for the first NPS began as early as 1989 (Šugman 1999), it was not until 2000 when the first NPS was introduced for the 2000–2010 period (*NPS*, 2000).

The most recent NPS (2014), for the period 2014–2023, defines the strategic, financial, professional and organisational directives needed for the realisation of the Sports Act, along with defined actions and measures. Thus, NPS (2014) clearly identifies the priorities for the state which are centred on the creation of sports development conditions as an important developmental element for society and for individuals which seeks to reduce the inequality in accessibility of sport and exercise since participation in sport and physical activity is income-dependant in Slovenia. The NPS (2014) identified seven main areas of focus as illustrated in Table 2.

Sports programmes are considered the most visible part of sport and form a substantial basis of sport delivery in Slovenia. The sport programmes are defined within NPS and are delivered by different contractors responsible for programme-implementation (*NPS*, 2014). It should be noted that elite sport is fully integrated within the wider sports system and is not considered as standing alone (*ibid.*). Within Slovenia, this reflects a belief that recreational and elite sport cannot be separated because they are mutually dependent.

The main management of the NPS 2014 sits within the MESS and the OCS-ASF (*NPS*, 2014) indicating the interlinkage of governmental and civil spheres of sport, as well as the role of OCS-ASF in the governing of Slovene sport. The role of the OCS-ASF in governing sport was lawfully recognised by the Sports Act in 2017 (*Zakon o športu*, 2017). The implementation of the NPS, however, falls under the responsibility of all organisations that deliver the programmes (*NPS*, 2014). An illustration of management and implementation of the entire NPS is provided in Figure 2:

### Financing structure of the sport policy system in Slovenia

In Slovenia, sport is considered a public good and is therefore financed from public funds (Kolar *et al.* 2010). With transparent public funding of sport, the state aims to maintain the accessibility of sport for people of all ages and abilities (*NPS*, 2014). The funding structure is aligned with the overall structure of the sport system and it is allocated annually according to the Annual Programme of Sport (APS) (*NPS*, 2014). It is important to note that there are no priority sports as such identified in Slovenia. By investing in a broad range of sports, Slovenia adopts what Shibli *et al.* (2014) termed a 'diversification' approach. Within Slovenia priority sports are seen as unethical and instead public co-funding of sport defined in the APS is based on evaluation of sports disciplines and their programmes (Jurak *et al.* 2010). The evaluation is based on various criteria including *inter alia* the quality of sporting achievements, popularity of the discipline, attractiveness to media, national importance and other factors as defined by the MESS (Kolar, Bednarik, Kolar *et al.* 2010). The categorisation model serves as a measure for determining the quality of sporting achievement and evaluation of sports disciplines, while the level of expertise of the staff (trainer, instructor, coach etc.) is also an important factor in funding allocations as more professionally qualified staff should receive higher funds (*NPS*, 2014).

There are two main public providers of funds on the state level; MESS and the Foundation of Sports Organisations (FSO), while the third and largest provider of public funds are local

**Table 2.** Focus areas and sub-areas of sport identified in the NPS 2014<sup>5</sup>.

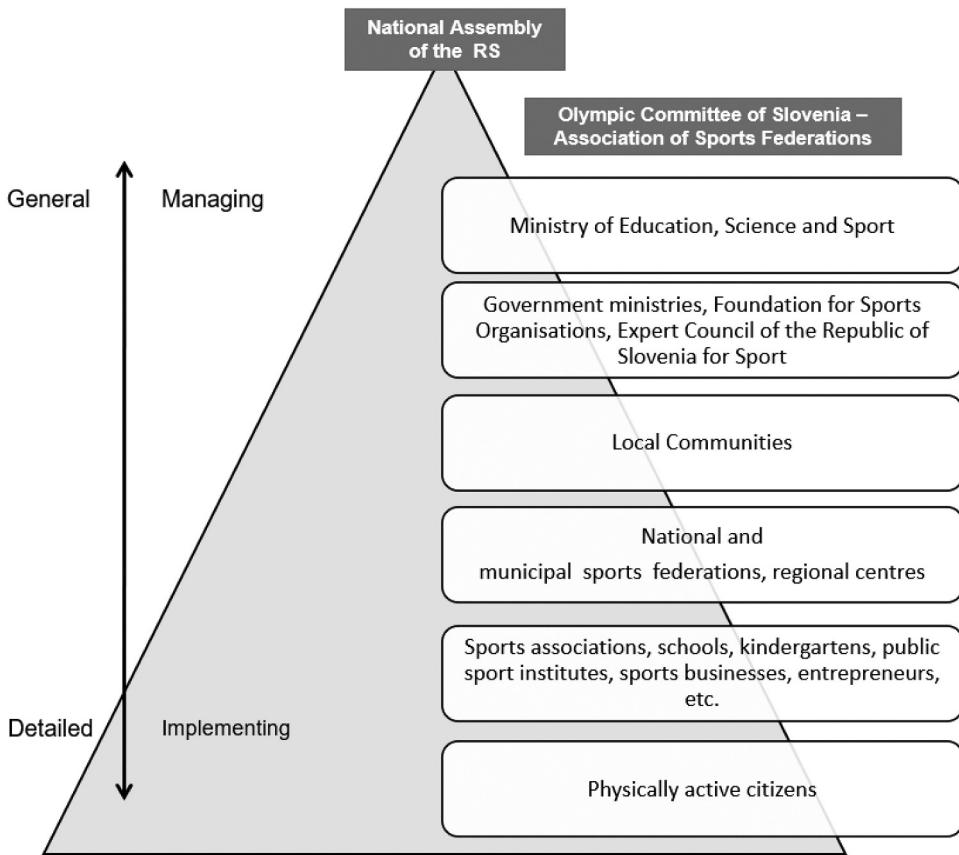
FOCUS AREA	SUB-AREA
Sports programmes	Sport in the education system Leisure time physical education of children and youth Physical education of children and youth with special needs Extracurricular sports activities Physical education of children and youth oriented into national and elite sport National level sport Elite sport Disability sport Sports recreation Sport for senior citizens
Sports facilities and outdoor	natural sports areas
Development tasks in sport	Education, training and specialisation of expert professionals in sport Statutory rights of athletes, coaches and expert support to programmes Education of talented and elite athletes Monitoring of athletes' physical prowess, training advice and expert support programmes Health care of athletes Elite athletes and elite level coaches' employment in state administration and in business companies (dual career)
Organisation of sport	Publishing in sport Science and research in sport Information communication technology in sport Functioning of sports organisations Voluntary work in sport Professional sport International cooperation in sport
Sports events and promotion of sport	Sports events Sports tourism Public information about sport Sports heritage and sport museums
Social and environmental responsibility in sport	Sporting behaviour Prevention of doping in sport Athletes' Ombudsman Sustainability in sport
Support mechanisms for sport	De-bureaucratisation of sport Prevention of corruption in sport betting Quality assurance and supervision of NPS implementation

Note. Adapted from NPS (2014).

communities<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1), which on average contribute around 70% of public funds for sport (Kolar, Bednarik, Kolar *et al.* 2010) indicating that Slovenia adopts a decentralised model of financing (NPS, 2014). MESS resources are provided by the Government budget of the Republic of Slovenia, while local-level resources are provided by the budgets of the local communities (*Zakon o športu*, 2017). According to the NPS (2014), the public funding for sport areas and programmes is defined in the APS, however there are three exceptions: *Sport in the education system* falls under the scope of the education department within MESS, along with most of the delivery of *Disability sport*. *Support mechanisms for sport* are delivered in cooperation with the OCS-ASF and relevant governmental departments for regulation and tax policy. For these reasons, NPS places greater emphasis on the organisation of public financing of competitive sport. To fully implement the NPS, funding is also required from organisations responsible for its delivery, other ministerial sectors and private resources. There is minimal funding provided for sport from other resources due to the size of the Slovene market, making it uninteresting for investors, sponsors and advertisers (Jurak *et al.* 2010).

Although the funding structure follows the NPS, in case of insufficient funds, priority tasks must also be considered when setting the APS at all levels. The tasks are divided into group one and group two as identified in Table 3, where the first group takes priority over the latter (NPS, 2014; *Zakon o športu*, 2017). As illustrated in Table 3, in Slovenia, both recreational and elite sport are identified as priorities





**Figure 2.** Management and implementation of the NPS.  
 Note. Adapted from NPS (2014, p. 55).

**Table 3.** Priority areas in sport as defined in NPS 2014.

Group one – Highest priority	Group two – Secondary priority
Leisure time physical education of children and youth	Extracurricular sports activities
Physical education of children and youth oriented into quality and elite sport	Physical education of children and youth with special needs
Sports facilities and outdoor natural sports areas	Sports events
Sports recreation	Publishing in sport
Sport of senior citizens	Ombudsman of athletes’ rights
Elite sport	Science and research in sport
Education, training and specialisation of expert professionals in sport	Information communication technology in sport
Statutory rights of athletes, coaches and expert support to programmes	National level sport
Functioning of sports organisations	Sports heritage and sport museums
Voluntary work in sport	Sporting behaviour
Prevention of sport doping	Sports tourism
Disability sport	
Public information about sport	
Sustainability in sport	

of the system. In Slovenia the sport policy system reflects a belief that focusing solely on elite sport prioritises a snapshot view and the present at the expense of the longer-term view (Horvat 2020).

Additionally, the NPS (2014) allows for flexibility in fund allocation by local communities based on their interests and traditions, highlighting again that the development of sport, history and tradition are inter-connected. In Slovenia different local communities have varied interests and traditions, and the funding system allows funds to be allocated accordingly. For example, in Kranjska Gora, Nordic skiing is considered a high priority by locals and therefore this sport receives greater funding than elsewhere. While public funding is the most stable source of funds for elite sport, OCS-ASF is also an important financier which provides funds to elite sport development programmes.

Linked to financing is the categorisation document that defines the criteria for the evaluation of sports disciplines, sporting achievements that allow athletes to gain statutory rights, and for registration of athletes and organisations (*Pogoji, pravila in kriteriji za registriranje in kategoriziranje športnikov*, 2013), which is why it is also used as criteria for annual allocation of public funding within the scope of APS. Essentially, the model provides the basis for sports discipline classification based on comparative variables in various categories, including the athletes' results. The higher the results, the higher the variable value. The funds are allocated to NGBs by the MESS, while the categorisation system itself is managed by the OCS-ASF. Since its creation, the categorisation system had a positive effect on the development of quality, quantity and dispersion of the elite sport in Slovenia (Kolar and Rajšter 2010). Categorisation therefore enables funding to be allocated to a wide range of sports.

Categorisation also influences the support and rights afforded to individual athletes as the better the athlete's results, the greater the support and rights they receive. Support for athletes comes in many forms including the adjustment of school and study obligations; monitoring of their physical prowess and expert support to their programmes; health care support; elite athlete employment and dual career. Additionally, there is also the athletes' ombudsman.

Whilst athletes have several rights, Kolar (2010) points out that Slovene taxation policy does not favour athletes, which may be the reason why Slovene athletes move to countries with better taxation policies, hindering professional sport in Slovenia. Additionally, the legislation limits the donations and sponsorships to sports organisations as these are required to pay 20% tax (*ibid.*). Another challenge is the poor management of non-profit sports organisations reliant on amateur staff which limits rivalry and results in a reduced market share in leisure expenditure (Jurak *et al.* 2010).

## Contextual influences on the contemporary sport policy system in Slovenia

Slovene sport policy system is rooted in a unique context and its processes and organisation must be tailored to fit the culture, society, and goals (Bray 1991). Thus, on one hand the contextual characteristics limit the sports policy, whilst on the other hand, they allow for unique adaptations to take place. Indeed, to overcome the shortcomings of being small, these states have developed unique features (Sam 2015) by focusing on the maximisation of effectiveness and efficiency of the available resources (Houlihan and Zheng 2015).

Several contextual features and adaptations that positively influence the sport policy system in Slovenia and support achieving the goals and principles outlined in the Sports Act (2017) and NPS (2014) – to provide opportunities for physical activity and sport to every resident of Slovenia – were identified in the study. It is important to identify and make sense of these specificities to understand the Slovene sport policy system and its organisation. These contextual influences are *characteristics of scale*, *cultural characteristics*, and *characteristics of the natural environment*.

### Characteristics of scale

Due to its small size, Slovenia developed additional features in its sport policy system which influence its success. For example, individuals in sport undertake several roles simultaneously (for example, being a coach and a club or state-level official etc.) which can enhance decision-making and information transfer as expertise in different areas is held by the same individual (Horvat 2020). As Sam and Jackson (2015) state, closer personal ties of individuals that know each other may lead to

more trusting relations that may also increase resilience of the state as a whole. Similarly, smaller talent pool allows for a better cooperation and development of relationships (Campbell and Hall 2009). The lower total number of elite athletes also enables the application of the individual approach tailored to each athlete demonstrating another example of the flexibility of the system. It should be noted, however, that there is no general talent identification system at state level (Horvat 2020). Historically, this was present but NGBs and/or club level currently oversee this. However, due to low numbers of athletes and the application of the individual approach, no one is turned away based purely on their motor and morphological measurements even at the elite level because there are many other aspects that can influence success but cannot be measured (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, cultural transfer of knowledge occurring between coaches of different generations could signify a strategic advantage in the Slovene sport system. The small field of Slovene sport professionals enables the development of closer ties between not only personnel but coaches within the same or different sports disciplines. Indeed, the smaller number of citizens may lead to closer personal ties (Bray 1991) and better cooperation (Campbell and Hall 2009). Smallness enables mobilisation of resources that might otherwise not be possible or acceptable (Sam 2015) and this can increase the state's resilience (Sam and Jackson 2015). Moreover, due to size-related drawbacks of Slovenia (GDP and population), coaches as well as expertise and knowledge across the board in sports field are considered the most important influence of Slovene elite sport successes (Horvat 2020). In fact, human resources are what small states depend on (Houlihan and Zheng 2015). For example, expertise and knowledge (including scientific research) is the only area in sport, where the Slovene sports system can be competitive at the international level as it cannot compete based on the number of coaches, athletes, financial investments or sports facilities (*ibid.*). Hence, to develop knowledge, international cooperation in terms of coaching, research, and events, as well as having Slovene officials within IFs is considered important.

When considering coaches, it should be noted that like elite athletes, elite level coaches are also provided with employment opportunities in the public sector (NPS, 2014). There are two coach development pathways in Slovenia, one being through higher education study, while the other is vocational training (*Zakon o športu*, 2017) within NGB programmes. Undergraduate study is usually free in Slovenia as are the majority of vocational training programmes, which shows the level of support for the development of coaching staff. On the other hand, however, the new Sports Act placed the licence renewal under the jurisdiction of the NGBs, which has become about making revenue, resulting in additional costs for workers in sport (Horvat 2020). This increases financial struggles of coaches, who already lack opportunities to create an economic base for survival due to poor media exposure causing a lack of interest in the coaching profession (*ibid.*).

### **Cultural characteristics**

As outlined above, sport and physical activity are culturally significant in Slovenia due to the rich history of the state. Historically, national identity and culture in Slovenia were formed through language, but now are developed and shaped through sport, where a strong national identity linked to sport was identified among Slovenes (Godnič 2005). Indeed, the role of sport in fostering national unity and identity in small states is stronger than in their larger counterparts (Sam 2015). Strong sporting culture may be linked to Slovenes being one the most physically active nations in the EU as mentioned above. There has also been a noteworthy increase in women's participation in sport (Jurak 2010), especially amongst mothers who often determine how family leisure time is spent (Horvat 2020). Moreover, with most sports programmes being delivered in the education system (Jurak 2010), these school-based programmes are of high quality due to experts developing and delivering the sessions, resulting in Slovene children being highly physically able (Horvat 2020).

### **Characteristics of the natural environment (and sports facilities)**

Whilst there is variation in the quality of sports facilities, it is important to note that there is almost no school in Slovenia without its own gymnasium. These facilities offer additional space for physical activity and sport outside of school hours (Jurak 2010a). Nevertheless, indoor sports facilities are not the only provision of space for physical activity, as the natural outdoor areas also enable free and accessible access to sport for the public. Hence, Slovenia set objectives to ensure '0.35 m<sup>2</sup> of indoor and 3.2 m<sup>2</sup> of outdoor sport area per capita' for the NPS 2014–2023 period (NPS, 2014, p. 29). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Slovenes placed first in the category of using natural outdoor areas for physical activity in the EU (European Commission 2010), which highlights the strategic importance of such spaces not only in physical activity but also in facilitating competitive sport in Slovenia. Harnessing the natural environment to enable individuals to participate in sport and physical activity is crucial in Slovenia as reflected in state policy. Public sports facilities and natural areas for sport are intended for public use and are built, owned and managed by the state or local communities (*Zakon o športu*, 2017). The Registry of Sports Facilities shows that most public sport facilities are owned by local communities and not the state (Ministrstvo za izobraževanje, znanost in šport, 2022), increasing the already high costs of local communities. The network of sports areas ensures access to sporting activities for most of the population (NPS, 2000), which is crucial because free and accessible sports infrastructure is the base for peoples' physical activity (Jurak 2010a). It should also be noted that suitable geographical and climate conditions of Slovenia that form the natural outdoor areas enable the practice of summer and winter sports (NPS, 2014) and have also shaped the perceptions and attitudes towards sport in Slovenia which are linked to the high participation levels. For example, research concluded that as a national sport, skiing is highly linked to the historical development of sport, national identification and culture (Godnič 2005), which is conditioned by the climate and geographical conditions of Slovenia.

Furthermore, while the state-level competition system in Slovenia is not competitive relative to the international level, the hosting of international sporting events is still considered crucial for sports development (Horvat 2020). As elsewhere, hosting sports competitions in Slovenia is linked to economic and tourist impact locally and nationally (Kolar and Verovnik 2010). Additionally, these sport events are linked to the development of sports culture, organisation of sport, environmental promotion and overall promotion of physical activity or sport (NPS, 2014). Due to history, tradition and natural environment, most major international competitions are hosted in winter sports in Slovenia. As further noted by Kolar and Verovnik (2010), since 2002 local communities have provided most of the public resources for the hosting of large international sporting competitions as the state's support is minimal inferring that the interest of the local communities for hosting events is greater than the state.

### **Concluding remarks and future research**

In conclusion, the above description aids in understanding the organisation and management of an effective sport policy system in a small state of Slovenia. It highlights that while Slovenia is a young country, it has a rich sporting history and sports culture that have been shaped by the historical development (primarily throughout the Yugoslav period) and the natural outdoor areas for sport. While geographical and climate characteristics cannot be influenced by sport policies and are generally excluded from the sport policy analysis (De Bosscher *et al.* 2006), in Slovenia, the state actively seeks to maximise the use of outdoor natural areas for sport and physical activity through policy. These conditions are country-specific and have influenced the development of sport in Slovenia as well as its sports culture displayed through high levels of participation in physical activity (European Commission 2010, 2014) and sport being an imperative part of Slovene national identity (Godnič 2005).

The paper also demonstrates that whilst Slovenes aimed to establish their own identity during Yugoslavia, the Slovene sport policy system has its roots in Yugoslavia with initiation of the athletes' rights, state financing, and even decentralisation where local communities play an important part in sport management and financing. Another contribution of the paper is that whilst the Slovene sport policy system is limited by population size, contextual factors provide opportunities for strategic advantage including utilising the natural environment for sport areas, a small number of individuals taking on multiple roles aiding cooperation, knowledge and expertise transfer. The country-specific contextual characteristics are, thus, important in understanding of the Slovene context and taking these into consideration allows for a detailed description of the sport policy system in Slovenia. Indeed, disregarding the broader factors prevents a full encapsulation of the phenomenon studied (Dowling *et al.* 2018). Capturing the intricacies of the operation of the sport system is even more important when addressing small states since the constraints of population and GDP raises the importance of the management of the sport systems (Truyens *et al.* 2014).

A key feature of the Slovene sport policy system includes the interlinking of public and civil spheres in governing Slovene sport. In fact, the role of the OCS-ASF that represents the civil domain, has increased with the latest Sports Act in 2017. Similarly, the role of local communities in governing of Slovene sport is greater than that of the state when regarding financing, provision of facilities and delivery of sport programmes and competitions. Perhaps the questions for the future are to what extent is the role of the state in governing sport diminishing and what level of interest should the state place on sport in the future? This is particularly relevant as the year 2022 is an election year in politics with parliamentary, presidential, municipality level elections taking place, as well as elections taking place for the OCS-ASF and the FSO leadership. With the political and sporting landscape possibly changing, this will have organisational and funding implications on sport, and specifically on the creation of the forthcoming NPS due in the near future.

The interlinking of sport and education is also one of the main features of the Slovene sport system, providing the basis for sport participation (Jurak 2010). While elite-level athletes have their own rights, the elite sport is fully integrated within the wider sport system and both elite and recreational sport are identified as priorities of the sport system. On the other hand, however, there are no priority sports identified in Slovenia. With many sports such as sport climbing and female ski jumping still emerging in Slovenia and reaping new Olympic successes, a study into the sustainability of the non-priority approach could provide directions for the future sport development in Slovenia, especially when considering the financial implications of COVID-19. Likewise, having both elite and recreational sport as priorities may be questioned under the states's new leadership and financial input.

## Notes

1. *Fizkultura* (original)
2. Due to the tradition and heritage of sport in Slovenia, preservation of these aspects is crucial (NPS, 2014).
3. Sustainable development of sport, minimising negative impacts on society and development are intertwined with various areas of NPS, including facilities, outdoor areas, events, programmes etc. (NPS, 2014).
4. Sporting behaviour includes following the rules of the game, respecting others, without intentional injury, verbal or psychological harassment or the use of prohibited substances (NPS, 2014).
5. Some terminology from the official document translation was rephrased to maintain the meaning in the English language.
6. Most local communities have a sports department called Sports Office that deals with sporting matters, while smaller local communities deal with sport within their main offices.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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