# A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BALKAN NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEES WITHIN IOC GOOD GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES IMPLEMENTATION

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**ABSTRACT**
*Over the last decade, the Olympic Movement has placed growing emphasis on governance reform. This study examines how twelve Balkan National Olympic Committees (NOCs) have implemented the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance through systematic analysis of their official websites and public documents. Using a structured framework based on the IOC's seven governance principles, compliance was assessed across democratic structures, transparency, accountability, ethics, athlete involvement, inclusion, and autonomy. Data were drawn from statutes, financial reports, governance documents, and official communications of NOCs in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey. The findings reveal significant variation in governance adoption. Slovenia, North Macedonia, and Romania demonstrate the strongest alignment, particularly in financial transparency and athlete representation. Serbia and Croatia exhibit solid democratic structures but weaker inclusion measures, while Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Albania display limited visibility online. Regionally, 72% of NOCs have Athletes' Commissions, 64% maintain formal ethics bodies, but only 56% implement comprehensive inclusion policies. The analysis suggests governance adoption is primarily legitimacy-driven rather than performance-oriented. Democratic structures are widely institutionalized, but transparency and inclusion remain underdeveloped. These results provide a baseline for monitoring regional governance and highlight best practices such as Slovenia's Athlete Ombudsman, Romania's financial transparency, and Serbia's independent arbitration. The study contributes empirical evidence to sport governance literature and offers practical insights for strengthening transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness within the Olympic Movement.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Research on governance in sports organizations reveals critical insights into organizational effectiveness and good governance implementation. Strategic management and organizational structure demonstrate positive direct effects on good governance in sport, with organizational structure mediating the relationship between strategic management and governance outcomes (Garmamo et al., 2024). However, International Olympic Committee principles of good governance have not been adequately implemented across sports organizations, particularly regarding accountability, transparency, and democracy standards (Budevici-Puiu et al., 2020). The concept of governance in sport organizations has evolved significantly over the past two decades, driven by high-profile scandals and increasing demands for accountability (Chappelet & Kübler-Mabbott, 2008). Governance encompasses the structures, processes, and mechanisms through which organizations are directed and controlled, ensuring accountability to stakeholders while achieving organizational objectives (Henry & Lee, 2004). Democratic governance rests on performance, accountability, transparency, and participation, creating decision-making that is both inclusive and responsible. In sport organizations, however, when participation and representation are lacking, legitimacy and performance are put at risk (Parent, 2015). The IOC's governance journey began following the 1998 Salt Lake City bidding scandal, which exposed corruption and prompted comprehensive reforms (Transparency International, 2016). The establishment of an independent Ethics Commission in 1999 marked the first step toward systematic governance reform.

The 2008 Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance represented a watershed moment, establishing clear standards for all Olympic Movement constituents (IOC, 2008).

The Olympic Agenda 2020, adopted in 2014, further reinforced governance requirements, mandating all Olympic Movement organizations to "accept and comply with the Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance" (IOC, 2014). This created a cascading effect, requiring NOCs to align their practices with international standards. Research on governance implementation across different regions reveals significant variation influenced by cultural, economic, and political factors (Geeraert, 2015). European sport bodies (including NOCs) are guided to demonstrate high compliance levels of good governance and transparency due to EU governance requirements and stronger civil society oversight (Transparency International, 2016; EU Workplan for Sport 2011-2014, 2013). However, limited research exists specifically examining Balkan NOCs' governance practices.

This study draws on institutional theory to understand governance adoption patterns. Meyer and Rowan's (1977) concept of institutional isomorphism suggests organizations adopt similar structures to gain legitimacy rather than improve efficiency. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) three mechanisms of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative, help explain why NOCs adopt IOC governance principles. Website transparency has emerged as a reliable indicator of organizational governance quality (Gandía, 2009). Public disclosure of governance information signals commitment to accountability and stakeholder engagement (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Previous studies have successfully employed website analysis to assess the governance of sport organizations (Geeraert et al., 2013).

***European initiatives on governance in sport***

The implementation of good governance standards by National Olympic Committees (NOCs) in Europe has occurred through several initiatives, with researchers addressing the issue. The SIGGS project (2015-2016) intended to improve governance for NOCs and national federations because it provided some tools, transferred expertise, and established national contact points for sustainable and for good governance practices (Zintz & Gérard, 2019). Dochevska and Zdravkov (2019) studied European sport organizations' web presence, revealing different compliance degrees. The organizations complied in varying degrees with good governance principles for transparency, accountability, and stakeholder management. Even though independent monitoring and sanctions for non-compliance limit effectiveness (Geeraert, 2018), the International Olympic Committee attempts self-regulation through Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance (PGG) and also Key Governance Principles (KGPs). Good governance implementation extends to specific areas like anti-doping education, where NOCs must clarify their roles and responsibilities to maintain integrity and effective management (Exner, 2023).

In the Balkan context specifically, corruption negatively correlates with GDP per capita growth in countries including Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey, though governance tends to improve with EU integration (Biscione & Muço, 2021). The implementation of good governance principles in national sport federations faces challenges, as organizational actors responsible for implementation encounter difficulties in exercising codified governance principles despite recognizing their importance (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2024).

However, challenges persist in translating these governance principles across different contexts. Research on Global South countries reveals that national structures and legacies significantly impact how IOC governance transplants are implemented, with persistent tensions between governmental and sport stakeholders (García & Meier, 2022). Lithuanian strategic sports federations exemplify these challenges, achieving only 54.75% implementation of good governance principles overall, with transparency and public communication scoring lowest at 43.3% (Čingienė et al., 2015).

Current governance approaches predominantly rely on rational choice theory, assuming instrumental rationality drives behavior, which provides clarity but may lead to over-regulation and neglect of moral aspects (Geeraert, 2021). To address these limitations, ethical leadership emerges as essential, requiring visible role modeling, two-way communication about ethics, and consistent reinforcement of values to effectively safeguard sports' moral foundations (Heres, 2021)

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Olympic System represent a complex network of global sports governance that has evolved significantly since 1894. Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott's 2008 work provides a comprehensive examination of the IOC's structure, organization, and relationships

with key stakeholders, including National Olympic Committees (NOCs), International Sports Federations (IFs), and Organizing Committees of Olympic Games (OCOGs) (Chappelet & Kübler-Mabbott, 2008). Over time, Olympic governance has transformed from simple administration to complex network governance involving more than 24 types of stakeholders, including governments and intergovernmental organizations (Chappelet, 2015). This evolution means traditional hierarchical or market-based governance approaches are inadequate because collaborative governance models must accommodate the increased salience of elite athletes, civic groups, national courts, and various levels of government (Chappelet, 2021).

***Aim and objectives***

This study mainly aims to examine the adoption with implementation extent of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance (PGG) by National Olympic Committees (NOCs) throughout the Balkan region. In line with this aim, the study undertakes a comparative analysis of governance practices among Balkan NOCs. It identifies best practices that may guide governance improvements at both regional and global levels, while also drawing attention to strengths and weaknesses observed across the region. The central research question underpinning the inquiry is: To what extent have Balkan NOCs adopted and implemented the IOC's Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance?

To address this question, the study pursues five interrelated objectives. First, it evaluates the degree to which twelve Balkan NOCs comply with the IOC's governance principles. Second, it examines patterns of governance implementation that define the region as a whole. Third, it documents examples of good practice alongside areas that require further development. Fourth, it formulates recommendations aimed at enhancing governance at both national and regional levels. Finally, it contributes empirical insights to the field of sport governance, enriching the understanding of how global governance principles are adapted within specific institutional contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design grounded in systematic document analysis. The research follows an interpretive paradigm, recognizing that governance practices are socially constructed and context-dependent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The sample consists of twelve Balkan National Olympic Committees (NOCs), selected through purposive sampling. The NOCs were chosen based on four considerations:

– shared regional characteristics and historical context that provide geographic coherence.
– official recognition of NOCs by the International Olympic Committee (IOC).
– accessibility of data through official NOCs' websites, including documents available
– completeness of coverage, ensuring that all Balkan countries were represented.

Data collection took place during January and April 2025. A structured protocol was designed to capture multiple dimensions of governance. The first phase involved an analysis of website architecture focusing on navigation and information organization. In contrast, the second phase was focused on constructing a governance framework based on available online sources (including an inventory of statutes, reports, policies, and procedural documents). Content analysis was then applied to extract governance-related information from the materials. Following data collection, a systematic scoring framework was applied to quantify governance compliance. For each NOC, compliance with each governance principle was evaluated using a four-level scoring (0-3) point scale based on the evidence available on their official websites and public documents:

– Full compliance (3 points/100%) – Clear, accessible, and comprehensive evidence of the principle
– Moderate compliance (2 points/67%) – Partial evidence or incomplete documentation
– Limited compliance (1 point/33%) – Minimal or indirect evidence of the principle
– No compliance (0 point/0%) – No visible evidence of implementation.

Principal scores are computed as the mean of their indicators. The NOC's overall score is the mean of the seven principle scores. Compliance percentages were calculated as:

Individual NOC compliance = (Total points earned / Maximum possible points) × 100

Regional principle compliance = (Sum of all NOC scores for principle / Total possible scores) × 100

Overall regional compliance = (Sum of all scores across all principles / Total maximum possible scores) × 100

All indicators within a principle and all principles within the overall score are equally weighted. For

this research, the websites of the National Olympic Committees were examined.

The assessment of Good Governance adoption and implementation was based on the IOC Basic Universal Principles of Good Governance (IOC, 2008), which include:

1. Vision, mission, and strategy, requiring that sport organizations articulate a clear strategic direction and values.
2. Structures, regulations, and democratic processes, highlighting the need for transparent and democratic governance arrangements.
3. Highest level of competence, integrity, and ethical standards, requiring the establishment of ethical standards and safeguards against conflicts of interest.
4. Accountability, transparency, and control, asking for financial disclosure and reporting mechanisms.
5. Solidarity and development, initiatives for promoting sport development and education programs.
6. Athletes' involvement, participation, and care – assuring athletes' representation and mechanisms for protection.
7. Harmonious relations with governments while preserving autonomy.

## RESULTS

Based on an in-depth investigation of the official websites of twelve selected NOCs in the Balkan region, considering them as a source of organizational legitimacy, transparency, and public accessibility of information, the results are presented in Table 1, which shows the alignment of NOCs for each component of the IOC Good Governance Principles.

**Table 1.** *Governance Matrix of Balkan NOCs*

| | Vision & Strategy | Structures & Democracy | Integrity & Ethics | Transparency & Accountability | Solidarity & Development | Athletes' Involvement | Autonomy & Dispute Resolution |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **NOC** | Mission statement, strategic plan, long-term goals, values | Statutes, general assembly, elected board, elections | Ethics code, disciplinary rules, conflict of interest, anti-doping | Annual reports, audited financials, budgets, and procurement | Grassroots programs, gender equality, education, and solidarity | Athletes' Commission, representation, safeguarding, services | Autonomy safeguards, arbitration, independence clauses, cooperation |
| **Albania** | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| **Bosnia & Hercegovina** | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| **Bulgaria** | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| **Croatia** | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| **Greece** | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| **Kosovo** | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| **Montenegro** | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| **N. Macedonia** | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| **Romania** | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| **Serbia** | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| **Slovenia** | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| **Turkey** | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |

*Note. Full compliance (3points/100%) was assigned where clear evidence of implementation was present. Moderate compliance (2 points/67%). Limited compliance (1 point/33%) was assigned to minimal or indirect evidence of the principle. Non-compliance (0 point/0%) was applied where no evidence could be identified.*

The comparative analysis of twelve Balkan National Olympic Committees (NOCs) reveals an average compliance rate of 66% across all IOC Good Governance Principles. However, compliance levels vary considerably depending on the principle under review. The highest levels of compliance are observed in Structures and Democracy (92%), indicating that most NOCs maintain functioning assemblies, statutes, and elected boards. Athlete involvement is also relatively strong (72%), reflecting the widespread establishment of Athletes' Commissions. In contrast, accountability and transparency (67%) and ethics and integrity (64%) show moderate adoption, while autonomy (55%) is uneven across the region. Low levels of compliance are found in vision and strategy for several NOCs (55%) and inclusion and development (56%), suggesting that long-term strategic planning and diversity initiatives remain underdeveloped.

When NOCs are categorized by overall compli-

ance performance, clear distinctions emerge. The following classification in Table 2 categorizes the NOCs into four categories based on the overall compliance assessed for the seven IOC principles of good governance.

**Table 2.** *The NOCs classified in four different categories*

| Category | Threshold |
|---|---|
| Governance leaders | 80–100% |
| Solid performers | 60–79% |
| Developing organizations | 40–59% |
| Limited visibility | < 40% |

Governance leaders include NOCs of Slovenia (86%), North Macedonia (86%), and Romania (81%), each demonstrating comprehensive governance frameworks. Solid performers include Bosnia and Herzegovina (76%), Kosovo (76%), Serbia (71%), Croatia (67%), and Greece (62%). Developing organizations are represented by Turkey (57%) and Bulgaria (52%). Finally, limited visibility is observed in Montenegro (38%) and Albania (38%), where online information and governance documentation are minimal.

The study also identifies exemplary practices that illustrate governance innovation in the region. The Olympic Committee of Slovenia stands out for its athlete protection efforts through its independent Athlete Ombudsman (Varuh športnikovih pravic), a unique mechanism that offers advocacy for athletes' rights. The Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee (COSR) sets a benchmark for financial accountability by publishing detailed budgets, salary structures, asset registers, and reports on budget execution. The Olympic Committee of Serbia (OKS) demonstrates strong autonomy with its Permanent Sports Arbitration Court, ensuring independent dispute resolution. Lastly, the Olympic Committee of North Macedonia (MOK) appears to have the most thorough commission structure, including bodies for both athletes and gender equality, ethics and disciplinary action, financial oversight, and sports arbitration. These results show that while governance requirements are mostly in place, gaps remain in key areas like inclusion, transparency, and planning. The differences among countries highlight how political context, organizational capacity, and regional learning influence governance outcomes.

## DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The results show strong formal compliance with structures/democracy, but weaker compliance with *transparency, strategic planning*, and *inclusion*. This model is consistent with *institutional theory*. In coercive isomorphism**,** high-scoring areas are those most tightly linked to external mandates: IOC recognition rules, national sport laws, and, for some, EU regulatory expectations. Statutory provisions and formal dispute mechanisms are therefore widely adopted to secure legitimacy and funding. According to the *mimetic isomorphism***,** several governance artifacts (codes of ethics, policy templates, website sections) appear to be replicated from more established NOCs. Regarding *normative isomorphism***,** professional standards diffused via international governance networks remain weaker in the region.

The findings suggest that more than performance, legitimacy drives governance adoption. NOCs try to emphasize formal structures that demonstrate compliance. Meanwhile, essential measures such as transparency and inclusion remain weak. This reflects a predisposition toward symbolic embracing, which may initially limit effectiveness but can create the step for gradual improvements under external pressure. Stronger compliance is associated with better-resourced NOCs (e.g., Slovenia, Romania) and with political contexts that support democratic accountability. EU membership or candidacy also appears to encourage transparency by aligning with European governance standards. However, several limitations should be noted. Website analysis offers only a surface-level view and may not capture actual practice. Language barriers limited access to some documents, and the study reflects a specific time period rather than ongoing reforms. Unequal website structure and language availability may bias the visibility of governance practices, which could affect the results by ±2%. The study is a time-bound snapshot; updates after April 2025 are not captured. Finally, self-presentation bias may lead NOCs to emphasize their most positive aspects.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This study provides the first systematic assessment

of how Balkan NOCs apply the IOC's Good Governance Principles. While democratic structures and athlete representation are well established, weaknesses persist in transparency, inclusion, and long-term planning. The focus on legitimacy-driven adoption suggests a need for stronger incentives and capacity-building measures to encourage deeper compliance. Examples of best practice, such as Slovenia's Athlete Ombudsman, Romania's financial disclosure, and Serbia's arbitration system, demonstrate that meaningful governance reforms are possible and transferable across contexts. Future research should combine document analysis with interviews, surveys, and case studies to gain a fuller picture of governance practices. Comparative studies across other regions would also enrich the literature. Ultimately, strengthening governance remains essential for ensuring that NOCs are not only legitimate but also accountable, transparent, and equipped to meet the challenges facing the Olympic Movement.

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