

## **Diversification of WAG since the fall of Communism**

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This chapter examines the development of WAG systems since the fall of Communism in 1989. Drawing on Robertson's (1994; 1995) glocalisation theory, we examine how six case countries – Australia, Brazil, Italy, Romania, Russia, and The Netherlands – developed in relation to the global context of state-managed (Communist) WAG system thinking and local conditions and events. Our results show that Romanian and Russian WAG was significantly interrupted by the fall of Communism and today still need to recover to re-invent and stabilise their systems. Australia was earliest and has most prominently invested in elite WAG through the national government's implementation of a state-managed elite sport. Their system and performance success has, however, experienced challenges that have caused a number of changes. Brazil, Italy, and The Netherlands have not benefitted from extensive national elite sport systems, and their governing bodies have less consistently invested in WAG. Italy and The Netherlands have, however, adopted creative measures to develop WAG, particularly through popularisation activities. Italy stands out as an example of most effective local sustainable development, having achieved performance success, acquired funds for their elite operations, and importantly, not suffered allegations of abuse. In combination, the decline of Communist WAG and growth of Western successes has de-centred the East and diversified this sport's competitive landscape.

### **Introduction**

From 1952 until the fall of Communism in 1989, the most successful women's artistic gymnasts emerged from Communist sport regimes. Soviet gymnast Olga Korbut, Romanian Nadia Comaneci, and East German Maxi Gnauck were key such champions. The regimes, driven by the aim to demonstrate the superiority of the Communist way of life, were state-governed and –funded. They entailed modern training facilities, full-time coaching and support personnel, tertiary-level sport and coaching education, sport science research, network of sports (boarding) schools, financial assistance for athletes and generous rewards for competitive success (also for coaches), and a nation-wide talent identification procedure (Green & Oakley, 2001; Houlihan, 1994; Riordan, 1993; 2007). In addition to regime character, an additional feature that typified the Communist WAG system was what Kerr and colleagues (2017) have termed 'pixie-style model of WAG'. This model emerged at the end of the 1960s, and as represented by gymnasts

such as Korbut and Comaneci, prescribed gymnasts' age as young, bodies as small in length, free of fat, and sexually undeveloped, and behaviour as obedient, darling-like and cute (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Kerr, 2006). The training of 'pixie gymnasts' constituted early identification and specialisation, long hours with numerous repetitions to learn skills, and coach authority. These characteristics, and particularly the increasing risks for gymnasts that became associated with the increasing acrobatic form of WAG, concerned media and WAG stakeholders, especially during the 1970s (Barker-Ruchti, 2011). However, in the context of Cold War politics, the competitive success of the Communist gymnasts afforded the WAG system international role model status (Petracovschi, & Terret, 2013; Riordan, 1995) and convinced the international community that they needed to develop their WAG systems along pixie WAG policies, systems, and practices (Cervin, 2017). This copying was not limited to WAG, but represented what a number of scholars have called a 'global sporting flow from East to West' (Green & Collins, 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2006; Green & Oakley, 2001).

The fall of Communism in 1989 significantly impacted the international sport landscape (Riordan, 1995). While China was not affected, the East German system dissolved<sup>1</sup> and the other European Communist countries were faced with a choice of 'how sharply they should break with the past and adopt a pattern of sport based on market relations' (Riordan, 1995, p. 24). To date, few researchers have examined the consequences of the fall on former Communist countries' national elite sport systems. Two exceptions are Girginov and Sandanski's (2008) study on Bulgaria, and Petracovschi and Terrets' study on Romania, both of which describe the difficulties the countries experienced with regard to professionalization and private financing of elite sport. The Bulgarian case study identified three phases that affected the elite sport system between 1989 and 2000: The shrinking of the sport system, especially the number of sport organisations and the athlete population; the insulation of national sport organisations, mainly because they lacked state support; and the expansion of elite sport through development and innovation strategies that individual sport organisations implemented.

With relevance to how WAG in both former Communist and non-Communist countries has developed since 1989, what has changed is that a large proportion of coaches from former Communist countries have found employment around the globe. While statistics of the exodus are not available, qualitative investigations demonstrate what the transfer of Communist WAG expertise has meant for both the emigrating coaches and the receiving clubs and gymnasts (Kerr

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that the unification of East and West Germany integrated some Communist sport system characteristics (Volkwein & Haag, 1994).

& Obel, 2018). Further, what we can observe is that the competition landscape has changed since 1989. While Romanian and Russian gymnasts continue to perform well at international events, their dominance is not as strong. Today, gymnasts from around the globe successfully participate in highest international competitions.

In this chapter, the purpose is to examine the development of WAG systems since 1989 through the inclusion of six case countries - Australia, Brazil, Italy, Romania, Russia, and The Netherlands. Specifically, we pose the following questions: How did the fall of Communism reduce Romania's and Russia's WAG dominance? How did the Australian, Brazilian, Italian, and Dutch WAG governing bodies develop their systems to gain competitive ground? And lastly, what have the two former Communist countries done to reinvent their WAG systems since 1989? To answer these questions, we adopt glocalisation thinking (Robertson, 1994; 1995). Our theoretical starting point is Giulianotti and Robertson's (2012) argument that sports governing bodies and stakeholders do not simply follow global trends, but must develop innovative methods to remain competitive (for similar arguments, see Collins & Bailey, 2013; Green & Oakley, 2001; Maguire, 1994). Specific to WAG, we recognise the global influence the Communist WAG system continues to have, but assume that all national governing bodies develop and implement local measures to produce competitive success.

### **Glocalisation theory and WAG**

Scholars critical of the concept of globalisation developed glocalisation theory (e.g., Ferguson, 1992; Scholte, 2008). Robertson (1994; 1995), a key proponent of glocalisation, critiqued globalisation theory for being ambiguous, elusive and even redundant because he felt the conception neglected how local conditions, events, processes, and activities diversify societies. Robertson (1995, p. 25) even went as far as to write that globalisation mystifies cultural homogenisation, and the idea that 'bigger is better', obliterating 'locality – even history'. In arguing that localising forces and heterogenisation are features of life, Robertson (1995) moved beyond global homogenisation and universalization to blend the terms 'global' and 'local' with 'glocal'.

Robertson (1992) understands glocalisation as a social process (rather than an abstract category), through which communities develop according to global and local trends and standards. In his views, such 'glocalisation projects' represent the continuous 'features of contemporary globalization', capturing how individuals, social groups, and communities interpret, shape, and decontextualize global phenomena to suit their everyday activities (Robertson, 1994; 1995). Such glocal 'action-reaction' processes generate 'homegrown'

activities (Collins & Bailey, 2013), which have particular relevance for sport since, on the one hand, international governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and international and continental (sport-specific) governing bodies (e.g., International Gymnastics Federation; European Gymnastics Federation) significantly shape domestic policies and systems (Houlihan, 2009). On the other hand, research points to how local historical, socio-cultural and political conditions and events, government mentalities, financial conditions, and developmental activities influence local practices (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2012).

With regard to sport, Giulianotti and Robertson have led glocalisation research. This work has examined the development of football game identity and the emergence of transnational sport corporations (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004); fanship (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006) migration of football players (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007); and the development of Asian sport (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006, 2012). With regard to gymnastics, researchers have recently adopted the glocalisation perspective to examine the sportization of parkour<sup>2</sup> in New Zealand and Italy (Puddle, Wheaton, & Thorpe, 2018; Sterchele & Ferrero Camoletto, 2017), and Chinese sport and gymnastics governing bodies' reactions to gymnastics developments since the 1950s (Zheng, Tan, & Bairner, 2017). This latter research demonstrates how Chinese gymnastics predominantly developed in relation to USSR gymnastics. This adoption process was at times passive, that is, was globalising as Soviet influence extensively shaped Chinese policy domains. At other times, the Chinese responses were more participative, which involved the Chinese gymnastics governing body actively influencing the International Gymnastics Federation. A third response, which took place during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), was conflicting, as Mao Zedong's governance halted all gymnastics activities. Zheng and colleagues' study is exemplary in demonstrating how local conditions and events (e.g., Chinese Cultural Revolution), governmental processes (e.g., international influence through representation at the International Federation of Gymnastics - FIG), and developmental activities (e.g., training camps in the USSR) shaped local gymnastics operations, and importantly, affected gymnasts' competitive success during different phases of Chinese gymnastics developments.

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<sup>2</sup> While parkour is not a traditional gymnastics discipline, international and national gymnastics governing bodies have adopted parkour as an additional gymnastics discipline (e.g., FIG; Gymnastics NZ; Swedish Gymnastics Federation).

Against this glocalisation background, the six case country authors included in this chapter collected materials to chronologise the conditions, events, processes, and activities that influenced their countries' WAG systems. The materials included information on governance and structure of WAG; financing; number and demographics of the elite gymnast population; competitive success at major events; coach population; and other relevant information as to the state of WAG prior and since the fall of Communism. The information was collated through the authors' expert knowledge of WAG in the case countries; publicly available documents; informal interviews with relevant WAG stakeholders; and scientific and media texts. To collate the materials, the first author created Table 1, which presents developments the case country authors reported to have shaped WAG prior to and since the fall of Communism.

<Insert Table 1 here>

Based on the tabled information, we present below the six countries' developments prior to 1989 and since the fall of Communism. In the first section, we cluster the Communist and non-Communist countries to sketch their distinctive situations. In the second section, our aim is to highlight the local events and conditions that have shaped WAG developments since 1989. We begin with Australia as a state-managed system; move to Romania and Russia as former state-managed systems; and then Brazil and The Netherlands as systems receiving limited and temporary state support. Lastly, we present Italy, as this country's development were most heterogeneous.

### **WAG prior to 1989**

Prior to 1989, the WAG systems in the two Communist and four non-Communist countries differed. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the Romanian and Soviet systems constituted state-governed and -funded *regimes* (Riordan, 2003). In Australia, Brazil, Italy, and the Netherlands, (elite) sport did not have regime character. Rather, individual institutions (e.g. clubs), mostly through volunteers, offered sport activities and in some cases elite sport training. Yet, as the global sporting arms race gained importance (Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Houlihan & Zheng, 2013), Communist sport success motivated non-Communist governments to develop elite sport (Green & Oakley, (2001). The Australian government was earliest in adopting strategies, and has most closely followed and implemented state-managed sport policies (Green & Oakley, 2001; Houlihan, 2002). Specific to WAG, the formation of the Australian Institute

of Sport (AIS) in 1981 resulted in the hiring of Chinese coach Ju Ping Tian<sup>3</sup> in 1983, who developed a national elite WAG performance progression program. While not overly distinctive, the program's demand for precision reflected Chinese and Russian approaches to gymnastics. With the implementation of this program, the then Australian Gymnastics Federation began to invest in networking and coach education, bringing British expert coaches to Australia for workshops and sending Australian coaches to the USSR to learn (Kerr & Cervin, 2016).

In Brazil and Italy, the Communist influence had few effects. WAG followed a de-centralised structure and no national sport policies were implemented. A first development towards Communist WAG occurred in Italy in 1984 through the founding of one elite training centre - Brixia Brescia. In The Netherlands, despite a de-centralised organisation of sport (Waardenburg & Bottenburg, 2013), Communist influence was evident from the 1970s onwards through the Dutch Sports Federation's creation of the national sport centre 'Papendal' in 1971; elite gymnasts being obliged to train there and live with billet families from 1976 onwards (Waardenburg & van Bottenburg, 2013); and the reception of coaches from Hungary, Romania, and USSR from 1972 onwards.

### **WAG since 1989**

Since the fall of Communism in 1989, the six case countries' national WAG's systems have changed significantly. While the global acceptance of a state-governed and –financed system and the pixie-style model continued to influence countries' efforts to systematise this sport, a number of specific local events and conditions heterogenised the six countries' WAG developments. In Australia, two key local events and conditions compromised the state-governed and –funded system established during the 1990s. First, as the Communist coaches hired by state sport institutes began to develop successful gymnasts (Kerr & Obel, 2018), the state and club coaches did not want to lose their 'investments' to the centralised AIS because this would have changed the gymnasts' affiliations and cut the state institute funding attached to these athletes. Second, in 1995, AIS gymnasts accused coaches of abuse. While the resulting Opie Report did not find evidence for the allegations, the accusations and inquiry damaged the AIS program and the then national coach Ju Ping Tian (Varney, 1999). In this context of state institute dissatisfaction of having to pass on their successful gymnasts and AIS criticism,

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<sup>3</sup> Zheng, Tan and Bairner (2017) write that the Chinese gymnastics coaches of the 1970s were trained by Soviet coaches through training camps and other forms of exchange. As Ju Ping Tian was national women's coach from 1981 to 1983, she undoubtedly was influenced by Soviet gymnastics experts.

support for a de-centralised national program grew and became implemented in the later 1990s, a change, which produced the best ever WAG results between 2003 and 2010. Since 2010, success has stalled, however, and Gymnastics Australia is today hoping that the recruitment of Romanian-American Mihai Brestyan, and the performance progression program that he has implemented, will revitalise WAG.

For Romanian and now Russian WAG, the key local condition that troubled these two countries post-1989 was ceased state-governance and -funding (Riordan, 1995). As an immediate consequence, coaches and gymnasts lost their livelihoods and were forced to, or took the opportunity, to emigrate (Riordan, 1995). The lack of funding also closed training centres and (boarding) schools, and ended coach education, research, and talent identification procedures, and financial assistance for athletes. In Romania, although performance success continued for some years, and the two key coaches Octavian Bellu and Mariana Bitang kept the country's WAG invincibility mirage alive through continued national and international media attention, the sport's downfall moved the media discourse from supremacy to disappointment and indignation. This country's failure to qualify for the 2016 Olympic Games (OG), coupled with former gymnast Maria Olaru's (2016) book 'The Price of Gold', which described the physical and emotional violence practiced by Octavian Bellu and Mariana Bitang, climaxed the changed local representation of gymnasts.

In Russia, it was not until President Putin's 2006 directive to rebuild elite sport that some infrastructure was restored, influential coaches kept and even brought home, and the existing, although reduced, gymnast population cultivated more systematically. The directive also secured a sponsorship deal between the Russian Gymnastics Federation and the country's largest partly state-owned consumer bank VTB. Putin's 2006 government directive and the sponsorship deal with VTB Bank have contributed to revitalising this country's WAG system, however, as the sponsorship is top-heavy, and local government support remains insecure, existing funding is insufficient to filter down to cover the needs at grass roots level WAG.

More long-term, a domestic condition that continues to concern Romanian and Russian WAG is the free market economy that these countries have adopted since 1989. As Girginov and Sandanski (2008) and Petracovschi and Terret (2013) have demonstrated through their Romanian and Bulgarian case studies, adopting consumer and marketing thinking after a long history of state governance is difficult. Moreover, sport participation now relies on consumer choice, rather than Communist ideologies of state service and rewards, a condition that increasing costs of participation and the sport's loss of popularity complicate. Today, in

addition to a lack of state-management and -funding, Romanian WAG suffers an image crisis, has a reduced elite gymnast population, and is led by very few and mostly aged coaches. Efforts to re-invent the elite sport and WAG systems will continue to challenge this country's sport organisations (Petracovschi & Terret, 2013). Similarly, Russian WAG popularity and population is today much lower than prior to 1989, and this country continues to risk decline if stakeholders cannot develop additional strategies to maintain and improve its WAG operations.

In contrast to the former Communist countries' decline of WAG, Brazil, Italy and The Netherlands have since 1989 increasingly developed their WAG systems. In many ways, these efforts reflect the global sporting flow from East to West that has shaped elite sport systems around the globe (Green & Collins, 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2006; Green & Oakley, 2001). In Brazil, the development of WAG began through the hiring of Soviet-trained coaches, before and particularly since the establishment of the 'Curitiba Training Centre' in 2000, and the Brazilian Olympic Committee and Ministry of Sport's intense elite sport investment leading up to the 2016 OG, which included the athlete funding scheme Brazil Medal Plan. These Communist-informed measures have brought competitive success since 2001. Two domestic events and conditions have complicated Brazilian WAG activities. First, in 2008, gymnasts alleged to have experienced abuse by stakeholders of the Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation and Curitiba Training Centre coaches, which resulted in a change in presidency and Technical Committee, and led to the closure of the national training facility Curitiba and dispersion of gymnasts back to their clubs (Molinari, Costa, Monteiro, & Nunomura, 2018). Second, the Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation has since 1989 missed to implement gymnast and coach development strategies. At the 2016 OG, the elite gymnast population was small and relied on gymnasts that have been in WAG since 2001 and the lack of employment opportunities provided to Brazilian coaches has resulted in coach emigration (Nunomura & Oliveira, 2012). While the lack of gymnast development is today changing (only one gymnast is from the 2001 generation), the consequence of the coach emigration continues to mean that Brazilian WAG relies on the costly employment of foreign coaches. The Brazilian Olympic Committee's latest recruitment of Russian-American Valeri Liukin, who has coached several Olympic champions, continues this trend of hoping that first generation Soviet-trained coaches produce WAG performance.

In The Netherlands, the 1970s efforts to systematise WAG were initially stalled by financial problems and missing competitive success. With the closure of Papendal in 1992, the distribution of gymnasts back to their home clubs and gymnast retirement created modest



success during the 1990s. Through the creative work of a number of coaches employed by individual clubs, WAG regained momentum, producing a ‘golden generation’ of gymnasts from 2002 to 2005. In response, the Royal Dutch Gymnastics Federation (KNGU) restructured WAG in 2008. With regional, national, and talent development centres in place, competitive results flourished and KNGU used the opportunity to initiate the 2012 OG campaign #OrangeElegance. Allegations of abuse, through Simone Heitinga and Stasja Kohler’s biography and media reports, overshadowed these developments. Several coaches implicated in the allegations were fired and serious and heated discussions about elite WAG and child-friendly elite gymnastics training followed. Today, Dutch WAG success continues, with KNGU running a further social media campaign, the 2020 OG #TheForceIsGrace campaign.

In Italy, the development of WAG was more heterogeneous than in Brazil and The Netherlands. In the first 10 years following 1989, the country’s national governing body, the Italian Gymnastics Federation (FGI), was autonomous from the state and self-supported. The project Brixia Integral Development, which the gymnastics club Brixia Brescia initiated and funded in 1990, was a grassroots project to develop elite WAG led by Enrico Casella. This project was crucial in advancing Brixia Brescia to a permanent, although modest, WAG training facility and develop elite-level success. With this success, particularly Vanessa Ferraris’ World Championship title in 2006, and Italy’s transformation to a state-dependent sport support system from 2000 onwards, the FGI began to co-finance the training facility. This included the employment of Enrico Casella as the national head coach in 2004, who implemented a scientific approach and athlete-centred pedagogy to train elite gymnasts. Moreover, the FGI’s Gymnastics for All and Olympic Gymnastics campaigns to increase the Italian WAG population (starting in 2000), as well as the MTV reality television show that was broadcasted for five seasons (starting in 2011), and their own online TV channel (starting in 2017) to generate sponsorship deals, have made WAG more visible. Today, despite limited funds, Italy’s WAG success continues and Brixia Brescia is recognised as an International Academy, where federations and clubs from all over the world meet to develop skill and knowledge (Brixia International Academy F.G.I., 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to examine the development of WAG systems in Australia, Brazil, Italy, Romania, Russia, and The Netherlands since 1989 using glocalisation theory. Our results demonstrate that the Communist WAG system influenced the four sampled non-Communist countries to adopt measures to develop this sport. In Australia, Brazil, and The Netherlands, the

adopted development strategies most closely reflected Romanian and Russian WAG regime characteristics. This homogenisation process entailed what a number of scholars have named a global WAG flow from East to West (Green & Collins, 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2006; Green & Oakley, 2001). Italy's efforts to develop WAG stand out for being less driven by Communist thinking. By adopting strategies specific to this country's financial context, building local coaching expertise, and investing in popularising WAG, this country has developed a WAG system that produces competitive success, has a sustainable WAG athlete and coach population, has acquired funds for their elite operations, and has developed an internationally recognised training facility.

Our results demonstrate how local events and conditions have heterogenised WAG systems and continue to pose specific domestic challenges. The acquisition of funds and cases of abuse stand out as common such challenges. In terms of funding, our chapter outlined different funding systems and the domestic challenges these pose because of insufficiency, purpose, and funder-receiver relationships. A response to the challenge of insufficient funding, as adopted by Italy and The Netherlands, was to implement innovative popularising strategies. In the former Communist countries, where stakeholders have not yet accustomed to a free market economy, marketing and sponsorship funding is either limited or non-existent, and will continue to need innovation. In terms of abuse, cases that generated inquiries and significant media attention were reported in Australia, Brazil, Romania, and The Netherlands. In these countries, the abuse cases affected local affairs, and similar to financial challenges, will continue to require organisations to develop preventative measures. It is a situation that demonstrates how uncritical reflection of dominant practices (i.e., pixie style model of WAG) can have undesired consequences (Collins & Bailey, 2013). While some WAG organisations have started to distance themselves from the Communist WAG system, and its pixie-style model in particular (e.g., Sweden), more critical reflection of these understandings, and development of local strategies to safeguard gymnasts, are necessary to re-invent WAG.

In conclusion, our results have shown how the fall of Communism in 1989 has de-centred Romanian and Russian WAG and how the strategies adopted by the included non-Communist countries diversified the international WAG landscape. Regardless of decline or gain, however, our chapter has demonstrated that the developments within each of the six countries' WAG systems evolved in interaction with global and local events and conditions. Thus, while sport policy research outlines factors that create successful sport systems, it is

crucial that sport organisations acknowledge local events and conditions, and are prepared for domestic reactions, when developing their sport systems.

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