

Journalistic Framing of Finnish Ice Hockey Club Jokerit in the Russian-Led Kontinental Hockey League

Joakim Särkivuori ¹  and Antti Laine ² 

¹ School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

² Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Correspondence: Joakim Särkivuori (joakim.v.f.sarkivuori@jyu.fi)

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Abstract

One of the major franchises in Finland’s top division in men’s ice hockey (Liiga), Jokerit Helsinki, sold its home arena and half of its shares to Finnish-Russian oligarchs in 2013. Jokerit also switched to the Russian-led Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) and competed there from 2014 to 2022. Russia’s KHL project and its expansion to the West can be viewed as a form of soft power. This study delves into the journalistic coverage of Jokerit during two specific periods: Its early days in the KHL and its later stages when exiting the league. These periods coincide with critical geopolitical events, such as Russia’s annexation of Crimea (2014), Belarusian protests (2020–2021), and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (2022). Our data consists of Jokerit-related articles in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* as well as interviews of the journalists who followed the team closely. We explore the critical socio-political coverage of Jokerit in *Helsingin Sanomat* during these periods and investigate whether the sports journalists recognized the broader geopolitical context of the KHL project and, if so, how this influenced their reporting. Utilizing the framing theory, we identified five frames under which to divide the articles: (a) sports events, (b) international relations, (c) power and governance, (d) business, and (e) unity. The sports event frame predominated during the early KHL era, whereas international relations and power and governance frames only emerged later. These shifts were not initiated by sports journalists but resulted from the efforts of journalists in other fields and increased the societal scrutiny of ties to Russia.

Keywords

ice hockey; Jokerit Helsinki; Kontinental Hockey League; newspapers; Russia; sports journalism

1. Introduction

Sports played a crucial role in shaping the Soviet Union's folklore and identity (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Borrero, 2017; Forsberg, 2021; Kiseleva, 2015). Soviet authorities invested huge resources especially in ice hockey to showcase the superiority of the communist system to capitalism (Backman, 2018; Baumann, 1988; Jokisipilä, 2015). The newly-born country of Russia started to boost its soft power strategies in the 2000s (Forsberg, 2021; Kiseleva, 2015) and included sports as a crucial part of this (Arnold, 2018). The Kontinental Hockey League (KHL) project emerged in the early 2000s with the explicit support of President Vladimir Putin (Konttinen & Rantanen, 2014). Putin mobilized significant financial resources from loyal oligarchs and corporate sponsors, such as Gazprom, to establish the league. As a component in Russia's soft power arsenal, the KHL's political and cultural mission was to project Russia's influence in the post-Soviet territory and foster better relationships with neighboring countries (Forsberg, 2021; Jokisipilä, 2011; Tynkkynen, 2016). As Finland shares a long history with its Eastern neighbor—both conflict and co-operation-wise—it has become accustomed to Russian and Soviet-style expertise in sports over the decades, particularly in ice hockey (Sihvonen, 2004).

On June 28, 2013, three businessmen—Gennady Timchenko, Harry Harkimo, and Roman Rotenberg—announced that Jokerit Helsinki, one of the biggest brands and most successful clubs in Finnish ice hockey, would switch to the KHL from the 2014–2015 season onwards. Timchenko and Arkady Rotenberg would acquire a 49% share in Jokerit, Roman Rotenberg was to take the role of the chairman, while Harkimo would retain the majority ownership (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Forsberg, 2021). Having maintained close connections to Russia before (Lempinen, 2019), Harkimo's autocratic moves sparked massive criticism behind the scenes in Finnish hockey (Forsberg, 2021). However, the move received generally excited reactions from the Jokerit's fanbase and the press (Laine & Hemmi, 2019).

1.1. *Russian Roulette Backfires*

Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to targeted sanctions for Gennadi Timchenko and Arkady Rotenberg. This forced the duo to sell their shares in Jokerit and Hartwall Arena to Roman Rotenberg. In 2019, Harkimo bought Rotenberg's Jokerit shares and afterward sold all the Jokerit shares to Jari Kurri, a Finnish National Hockey League legend. Kurri then quickly sold 40% of the shares to Norilsk Nickel Harjavalta Oy, a Finnish subsidiary of Norinickel, a multinational company owned by the oligarch Vladimir Potanin, who was not under sanctions (Backman & Carlsson, 2020). While the newly appointed Jokerit CEO Eveliina Mikkola stated that "Jokerit stays in 100% Finnish ownership" (Touru, 2019, para. 26), the arrangements were calculated moves resulting from sanctions imposed on oligarchs (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Forsberg, 2021; Lempinen & Paananen, 2019). Timchenko reportedly invested around 50 million euros in Jokerit between 2014 and 2019 and employed a "loss guarantee" strategy as well, which was common among oligarch owners across the KHL to offset financial shortfalls (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Hepojärvi, 2021). Jokerit amassed roughly 93 million euros in losses from 2014 to 2021 (Rajala, 2016).

Intense protests erupted in the spring of 2020 in the Russian satellite state of Belarus, especially in its capital city Minsk, when dictator Aleksandar Lukashenko's victory in the presidential elections was widely interpreted as fraudulent. Jokerit's season in the KHL was supposed to begin with an away game against Dynamo Minsk. The Finnish press closely followed the situation in Belarus, and the public put Jokerit

under intense pressure: Playing in Minsk was generally seen as capitulation to Lukashenko’s power politics and, more broadly, as overlooking the human rights abuses that had been consistently occurring in Russia and its sphere of influence throughout Jokerit’s KHL journey (Forsberg, 2021). This can be considered a milestone in journalistic and public criticism regarding Jokerit’s eastern endeavors. Finally, after Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022, it was an inevitable decision for Jokerit to withdraw from the KHL. A summary of Jokerit’s ownership arrangements between 2011 and 2023 is presented in Figure 1.

Through the KHL, Russia aimed to shape narratives and challenge Western hegemony via economic, cultural, and political aspects (Backman & Carlsson, 2020; Forsberg, 2021). According to Forsberg (2021, p. 220), the KHL had “a normalizing effect” on Finnish-Russian relationships, particularly among younger hockey fans. From the KHL’s perspective, Jokerit was a success story until 2020. Jokerit was the first team in the league from a country that did not belong to the Soviet Union’s satellite states during the Cold War and gained status as a strong brand within the KHL. Backman and Carlsson (2020) state that Jokerit’s leap to the KHL can even be seen as a logical extension of Russian influence in Finnish sports. According to Backman and Carlsson (2020, p. 517), the whole rationale of the KHL is hard to grasp “without considering Putin’s political ambitions and strategies” while Jokerit should be handled as “an individual case within a more extensive and enthralling master plan.” Forsberg (2021) concludes that while researchers should be careful not to exaggerate the KHL’s political purposes, the league’s message of keeping politics and sports separate aligns with the technique of “cultural statecraft” and was effective in Finland for a long time. It was also remarkable how, the Finnish political elite remained silent regarding the political role of the KHL, with only a few public statements warning against being too naive about Russian presence (Forsberg, 2021).

1.2. Soft Power and (Sports) Journalism

The concept of soft power refers to the means to success in world politics, emphasizing attraction beyond national borders through cultural interaction (Nye, 2004). While Western hegemony has long been based on universal values such as democracy, human rights, and equality, Russia has shifted its focus from universal values to cultural dimensions. Striving for an alternative narrative to the West, Russian leaders consider soft



Figure 1. Jokerit’s voyage to East and back to West. Source: Authors’ work based on Backman and Carlsson (2020), “Ensin myytiin Hartwall-areena” (2014), and Suvinen (2023).

power a political instrument for indirect control and manipulation of foreign populations, leading to a blurring of lines between cultural means and propaganda (Kiseleva, 2015).

Media plays a crucial part in disseminating soft power by shaping countries as partners or enemies (Nye, 2008). Research on media and journalism from the soft power perspective is quite extensive, especially in relation to the US (Blondheim & Segev, 2017; Hearn-Branaman, 2017; Segev & Blondheim, 2013) and China (Ittefaq et al., 2023; Li & Rønning, 2013; Wasserman, 2016; Wright et al., 2020; Yellinek, 2022) as well as other influential countries, such as the UK and Qatar (Wright et al., 2020), Russia (Szostek, 2014), and Brazil (Jiménez-Martínez, 2023). Elite sports, especially, are an effective way to spread narratives and desired messages (Koch, 2016). Sports media as a tool of influence has been recently studied by Connell (2018), Correia et al. (2021), Dubinsky (2018), Hasbani et al. (2021), Schler and Dubinsky (2020), as well as Yoon and Wilson (2016), to name a few. The nation-branding of Finland through sports media has been extensively studied by Tervo (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004). For Finland, sport was arguably the most influential tool to differentiate itself from the Russian empire before gaining independence (Viita, 2003).

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1. Research Questions

In this article, we study Finnish journalists' coverage of Jokerit during the team's KHL era from a socio-political perspective. There are two research questions: What kind of critical socio-political coverage about Jokerit was published in *Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS*) during 2014–2015 and 2020–2022? Did the sports journalists of *HS* recognize the broader geopolitical context of the KHL project, and if they did, then when and how did this affect their reporting?

2.2. Data

Our main data consists of Jokerit-related articles in the Finnish daily newspaper *HS* during two time periods: February 13, 2014, to June 12, 2015, and August 20, 2020, to May 14, 2022. In the initial timeframe, Jokerit's relocation to the KHL in 2014 coincided with Russia's annexation of Crimea. In the second time period, the Belarusian protests unfolded from 2020 to 2021, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, after which Jokerit left the KHL. In our data, we included all the articles from the two time periods that did not solely concentrate on sports performance, such as match reports.

HS was chosen as the source of material as it is the most read and largest subscription-based print newspaper in Finland, and its overall reach (both print and digital versions total 2,187,000 weekly) is the third biggest in the country after the tabloids *Ilta-alehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* (Media Audit Finland, 2023). According to a news valuation survey (Müller, 2024) conducted in 2023, *HS* is the second most trusted news source in Finland after the public broadcasting company Yle and, with the print and digital versions combined, also among the most important news sources in the country. *HS* can thus be considered a respected, reliable, and influential journalistic voice in Finland. Moreover, *HS* is published by Sanoma Media Finland, a market-leading cross-media business, which is part of Sanoma, the biggest media enterprise in Finland by revenue (Sanoma, 2023).

Our supplementary data consists of two interviews with *HS* sports journalists who covered Jokerit's time in the KHL the most, and one background interview with another *HS* (non-sports) journalist, who wrote an extensive report about Jokerit's ownership arrangements for the *HS* monthly supplement *Kuukausiliite*. All informants agreed to participate without anonymity. Sports journalist Heikki Miettinen (HM) was interviewed on October 10, 2023, sports producer Tero Hakola (TH) on October 12, 2023, and journalist Sami Sillanpää (SS) on October 12, 2023. We utilize phrases from the interviews in our results and discussion sections (Sections 3 and 4).

2.3. Framing Theory

News and media frames provide angles and narratives through which issues or events are portrayed. These define problems, interpret causes, and make moral evaluations. This happens through journalists selecting, emphasizing, and contextualizing specific aspects of a story. By identifying different frames, scholars identify trends and discourses (Babiak & Sant, 2021; see also Goffman, 1986). Recent examples of utilizing the framing theory in sports journalism research include Bell and Coche (2022), Broussard (2020), Parry et al. (2023), Pedersen (2017), Peterson and Muñoz (2022), and Sadri et al. (2022). Additionally, Hartmann et al. (2023) have aptly described how the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar highlighted the paradox inherent in elite sports entertainment and its underlying structures. While few would dispute Qatari sports washing, it must simultaneously be acknowledged that not everyone engages with sports in this critical manner, highlighting a paradox in how these events are perceived and experienced globally. Subsequently, it is also presumed and seen as natural that the proliferation of socio-political and critical frameworks in sports journalism does not occur at the expense of frames that positively and enthusiastically depict sports results and events (Hartmann et al., 2023).

2.4. Data Analysis

In our framing analysis of the newspaper data, we followed the four-stage model by Chong and Druckman (2007). Ultimately, we were able to employ an analytical framework of five frames under which to divide the articles:

- (a) The sports event frame consists of articles that focus on the team and the staff, and the match events of Jokerit (that did not solely concentrate on sports performance, such as match reports).
- (b) The international relations frame examines the geopolitical implications of the KHL.
- (c) The power and governance frame investigates issues such as corruption, governance structures, and the impact of political interference in the KHL and Jokerit.
- (d) The business frame highlights the role of ownership arrangements, marketing, and sponsors, as well as Jokerit's financial indicators.
- (e) The unity frame includes narratives that promote a sense of unity and solidarity through sports, most commonly referring to the fanbase of Jokerit.

We did not conduct a thorough analysis of the interview data, as the purpose was to use interviews as supportive material.

3. Results

In Table 1, we present the classification of the newspaper articles into the five frames and the number of articles in each. While it may be unsurprising that the sports event frame dominated both time periods, it is crucial to remember that we excluded all coverage solely focused on sports performance, such as match reports. Next, we explain the main themes and narratives in the frames during the two time periods.

3.1. First Time Period: February 13, 2014, to June 12, 2015

The majority of the coverage in the first time period handled Jokerit taking part in the KHL positively, focusing on how the Finnish-Russian collaboration would benefit Finnish hockey in general. Headlines said that “Businessman Roman Rotenberg promises to bring world-class entertainment to Helsinki” (Miettinen, 2014a) and “Finnish Liiga was too small for Jokerit” (Saarinen, 2014). Before the first home game, lyrics of the Russian national anthem were even printed in *HS* (“Jokerien pelit alkavat,” 2014) to help the spectators sing along (the anthem was played at every match throughout the KHL). Within the sports event frame, only two articles in the sports section can be seen as taking a critical stance: “Putin’s men have seized Jokerit” (Saarikoski, 2014) and “Liiga’s chairman Puttonen sees the KHL league as a risk because it is a tool for Putin’s assertion” (Nieminen, 2014). The former is a deliberately separate column by a political journalist, and the latter is an interview where no real stance is taken on the statements given by the chairman of the Finnish Liiga—highlighting the rivalry that existed at the time between Liiga and Jokerit. *HS* even published a response interview by the Jokerit CEO a couple of days later, where all geopolitical influence was unsurprisingly denied (Seiro, 2014). The journalists we interviewed described the early stages of Jokerit’s KHL journey as follows:

HM: In the beginning, I approached it from a sports perspective, although I was aware of Putin’s support. Putin wasn’t as much of a monster in the West back then. I wanted to give an interesting new league a chance. As things progressed, my eyes opened, and the tone changed.

TH: Heikki attended matches a lot, and I did editorial work. We probably looked at it from different angles....If you regularly follow certain events and individuals, it can influence your writing.

Two articles in the power and governance frame stand out due to their investigative approach. However, neither of these was the work of sports journalists. “Spies, power politics, and manipulators—Putin’s KHL is

Table 1. Number of articles in five frames during the two time periods.

	Sports event frame	International relations frame	Power and governance frame	Business frame	Unity frame
First time period (February 13, 2014, to June 12, 2015)	50	1	15	29	2
Second time period (August 20, 2020, to May 14, 2022)	32	27	14	8	9

more than just hockey” (Konttinen & Rantanen, 2014) explores Putin’s involvement in the creation of the KHL, which is seen not just as a sports league, but also as a geopolitical tool for soft power and influence. “Ettekö te tiedä, kuka minä olen,” (2015) on the other hand, sheds light on Roman Rotenberg, and the meteoric rise of the family’s business ventures during Putin’s era. Contradictions with the sports pages’ coverage are revealed in numerous instances in our data, where Jokerit’s athletic appeal overshadows its ownership arrangements: “Critics immediately raise their hands: it’s easy to play around when Moscow pours the rubles. Be that as it may, but the team is strong and plays enjoyable hockey” (Miettinen, 2014c, para. 9).

The business frame includes a reasonably large number of articles. However, this mainly results from a sponsorship conflict between Jokerit, the state-owned gaming monopoly Veikkaus, and the Maltese gaming company Unibet. The related debate reached the highest levels of government and led to a large-scale investigation. It is rather telling that this case stirred even the top politicians, while the soft power perspective of the KHL or the ownership arrangements behind Jokerit did not attract attention. On top of that, *HS* even encouraged Liiga’s clubs to take influence from Jokerit as a positive example (Miettinen, 2015) in the business sense. Regarding the financial and administrative connections, the journalists acknowledge that Jokerit got off lightly, although they also note that other Finnish companies operating in Russia might not have been critically evaluated enough at that time:

HM: Hakola saw the KHL much more as a monster than I did. In the early stages, I said, “Why criticize one team when you could criticize Fortum’s [Finnish energy company, one of the largest in the Nordic countries] operations in Russia?” At least Jokerit contributed millions in taxes to Finnish society, while Fortum caused tremendous losses for the taxpayers.

TH: I have a memory that sports were given a somewhat moralistic role regarding the KHL, compared to how the economic sections wrote about Fortum’s investments in Russia in the 2010s.

TH: I recall being critical from the early stages, but once the KHL gained momentum, it was probably mostly approached from a sports perspective. When you look at it now, the treatment that the KHL and Jokerit got was probably too gentle.

3.2. Timtsenko Is Putin’s Joker

We found out that one extensive report published outside of our time frames, “Gennadi Timtšenko is Putin’s Joker” (Sillanpää, 2018), was an influential turn in the critical scrutiny of Jokerit’s KHL era. It offered the most critical and insightful examination of Jokerit’s ownership arrangements and political motives within the KHL at that time. This cover story in the *HS Kuukausiliite* featured Jokerit’s logo with Putin’s face photoshopped on it (see Figure 2). Jokerit threatened to sue *HS* for this, and such controversy significantly gave the story increased attention. The text above the logo states that “Vladimir Putin’s inner circle has paid tens of millions of euros for the losses of Jokerit Helsinki.” The author of the article, Sami Sillanpää, was already convinced at that time that Jokerit’s involvement in the KHL, and especially the owners’ connections to Putin, required more thorough reporting:

SS: Sports as a political tool is an underexplored topic. It personally bothered me that the whole picture regarding Jokerit wasn’t presented. Articles often lacked information about the true role of Russian



Figure 2. Picture of the cover of *HS Kuukausiliite* (September 1, 2018).

financiers within Putin's inner circle, and how they had made their money...And I thought that Harry Harkimo's dual role as a member of the Finnish parliament and a partner of Putin's cronies had never been critically examined properly.

Both Miettinen and Hakola stated that people in the sports department of Helsingin Sanomat knew very little about this comprehensive report that was one of the first of its kind with its investigative and socio-political tone:

HM: I wasn't aware of the article before its publication.

TH: I probably knew at some point that the article was coming. Earlier, information often didn't flow well within the *HS* office.

3.3. *Second Time Period: August 20, 2020, to May 14, 2022*

The sports event frame was the most common also in the second time period, but these articles too began to adopt more critical tones. However, both this and the increase of articles in the international relations frame are mostly explained by Belarusian protests, which sparked a veritable storm of moral dimensions associated with Jokerit's participation in the KHL. There was a slight increase in the number of articles in the unity frame as well. This is explained by several articles covering the reactions that Jokerit's fanbase had to Jokerit's final stretch in the KHL. These articles emphasized the unity amongst the supporters in opposing the KHL.

Altogether, the increased critical perspective in the reporting is evident in our material. This is exemplified in the headlines of articles such as "Day of celebration, declares Jokerit, as the dictator's favorite child comes to

town” (Moilanen, 2021): An open jab at Dynamo Minsk’s visit to Helsinki. Tero Hakola recalls that the articles began to take on a more critical tone more frequently, especially during the time of the crisis in Belarus: “At some point, there was a shift towards a more socially critical and problem-oriented approach. For instance, during the Belarusian uprising, we wrote very critically.”

However, it is crucial to emphasize that sports journalists were not those proactive in the rise of socio-political coverage. In fact, they reactively jumped onto a moving train after critics started to emerge elsewhere. It even seems that, instead of self-criticism, sports journalists lectured Jokerit’s team, who did not condemn the Belarusian dictatorship straight away. For example, it was stated that:

Hockey players’ comments and seemingly self-centered values stigmatize the entire sport...If human rights are not of particular interest, Marjamäki and Lehtonen [Jokerit’s head coach and star player] should at least consider the well-being of their Belarusian colleagues and their loved ones. (Hakola, 2020, para. 12–15)

Such criticism towards one coach and one player is understandable and accurate, but at the same time questionable when we look at how little the geopolitical aspirations of the KHL had been examined by sports journalists earlier. Having said this, we also want to bring the voices of the journalists we interviewed to the forefront in the sense that they themselves acknowledge a certain naivety at the beginning of Jokerit’s KHL journey: “With my current knowledge and experience, I can certainly say that we should have written about Jokerit and the KHL more critically from the beginning. It’s easy to say now, but perhaps I was somewhat naive back then” (HM).

Relations between the West and Russia went into deep freeze on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale attack on Ukraine. Naturally, following this, the departure of Jokerit from the KHL was only a matter of time, and after a brief period of silence, Jokerit owners also assured that they were seeking the fastest possible way to withdraw from the league, while still respecting KHL regulations. Concerning our data, after February 2022, the sports events frame naturally disappeared entirely, and discussions concerning Jokerit shifted to political contexts, as seen in headlines such as “Russian website reports chilling letter: KHL clubs instructed to support the war” (Kalmari, 2022), and “Jokerit denies SVT’s information that players aren’t allowed to comment on the war in Ukraine” (Uusitupa, 2022). This critical coverage mostly revolved around the club’s ownership arrangements and financial indicators. Both of these gradually began to reveal aspects that sparked strong criticism from sports journalists, as Jokerit began to reorganize its ownership structure and cleanse its name from Russian associations (see Figure 1).

4. Discussion

4.1. Critical Socio-Political Coverage of Jokerit on HS

We utilized a five-part-categorization of criticism in sports journalism by Laine (2011, pp. 236–237), focusing especially on criticism directed at sports organizations (questions on financial, political, and governance-related factors), and criticism towards the sport’s societal status (discusses sports from a broader societal context) to measure the critical socio-political coverage Jokerit received during their time in the KHL. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the sports event frame articles lacked a critical stance on

the KHL's arrival in Finland. The few critical socio-political articles were published within international relations and power and governance frames, mostly focusing on the oligarchs' shady business history and the KHL's personal importance to Putin. However, until the Belarusian protests, these were published in other *HS* sections than sports.

Business frame articles mainly discussed the sponsorship controversy involving Jokerit, Veikkaus, and Unibet. Additionally, the "discount prices" of Jokerit match tickets were frequently mentioned, yet this coverage failed to delve into the broader impact these pricing strategies had. The unity frame slightly discussed the broader societal context—however, this frame only became relevant after the Belarusian protests. In summary, the most critical perspectives surfaced outside the sports section of *HS*.

4.2. Recognition of the Broader Geopolitical Context of the KHL by Sports Journalists in *HS*

It appears that there was a distinct division of labor within *HS*: Critical socio-political journalism regarding sports was published in politics and business sections, while the coverage focusing purely on sports events was the duty of the sports department. However, our interviews revealed that the sports journalists did recognize the geopolitical dimension of the KHL but chose not to write about it much. On the one hand, these topics were not perceived as interesting enough from the readers' perspective, and on the other hand, prevailing attitudes towards Russia and Putin were—understandably—at first more neutral. Despite this, we argue that aspects such as Jokerit's financial indicators and ownership inevitably received too little attention. Roman Rotenberg himself wondered how few questions the Finnish press posed about the whole ownership model ("Ettekö te tiedä, kuka minä olen," 2015). Based on our interviews, while this resulted from the naivete of individual journalists, it also had roots in the internal culture at *HS*:

HM: We had two rounds of layoffs in 2014–2015. Many journalists were let go, especially from sports....There was an event at Sanomatalo [*HS* commercial building] where Antero Mukka [editor-in-chief] announced that the sports department is not an important part of *HS*.

HM: All in all, sports has a weaker sensitivity to delve into societal issues....And when we do, we portray it like we were the first on the topic. But this isn't limited to sports; it's a broader issue at *HS*.

Finally, as awkward as it is to see the lyrics of the Russian national anthem in Finland's largest newspaper, this could somehow be explained by the general "KHL frenzy." However, Russia was already at war in Eastern Ukraine back then, which makes the article look rather disturbing: "In retrospect, it [publishing the lyrics of the Russian national anthem] does seem embarrassingly naive. I remember that the idea came from outside the sports department, from the higher-ups, and we in sports took the bait with humor" (TH).

4.3. Finnish Sports Journalism's Steps Towards a More Socio-Political Approach

Sports journalism has struggled to fully shake off its reputation as the "toy department of journalism," as it has for example been accused of uncritical reporting and excessively close relationships with its topic of interest (e.g., Boyle, 2012; Cassidy, 2017; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Weedon et al., 2018). Morgan (2010) has even summarized the main discourse of sports media as "bullshit." Finnish sports journalism has also been characterized as non-analytical and overly enthusiastic in its coverage (Laine, 2011, 2023; Laine & Turtiainen,

2018). However, based on our findings, we conclude that while these characteristics still exist, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

As Finnish sports journalists gradually became more attuned to the geopolitics and soft power dynamics behind the KHL, they undoubtedly advanced in grasping the socio-political contexts and highlighting those for the readers. Having said that, it is important to note that we only observed the sports journalism frames in one—albeit influential—Finnish newspaper, and with a small sample focusing on one distinct phenomenon. The data is also partly 10 years old. Nevertheless, both the change in tone over time in our data and the views expressed by the journalists interviewed led us to the conclusion that Finnish sports journalism has taken steps toward a more socio-political approach. And, while the so-called new generation of sports journalists was outside our scope, it is to be believed that they are more willing to frame their topics in societal contexts and are not afraid to take a critical approach:

TH: There have traditionally been and probably still are people in sports departments whose journalistic career has been exclusively spent there. And if they have a sports background on top of that, there is a danger of getting immersed only in the sports world. But I don't think young journalists face this problem. Current sports journalists are more socially aware and multidisciplinary.

Potential threats to this progress include measuring the reach of articles purely through “click metrics,” thus following the market logic that does not encourage the use of resources for in-depth and investigative sports journalism. In the interviews conducted for this study, sports journalists expressed the view that especially in online reporting, content is driven by what gets the clicks. These articles still typically focus on quick reads and draw inspiration from entertainment news by focusing on famous athletes, dramatic or dramatized details, and colorful language and headlines. Nevertheless, as academic research on the topic is lacking, we can only offer serious reflection rather than conclusions regarding the stance that consumers of sports journalism have on socio-political reporting. It also seems that blame should not be placed solely on the professional ambitions of sports journalists, but also on the preferences of sports followers and the commercial logic followed by media companies: “The number of clicks determines everything. At least for me, that has been burdensome” (HM).

This raises the question: Do consumers of sports journalism have an interest in socio-political reporting? In our literature review for this article, we did not find Finnish studies specifically addressing this issue. However, one similar study provides insights. Laine and Turtiainen (2018) examined how sports journalism serves as a “societal watchdog” in Finland, using the state-funded development project of high-level sports as a case study. While all newspapers covered the project, relatively few articles were published, given the project's duration and the controversies surrounding it. These initial articles were also relatively tame. Once the controversies gained wider attention outside of sports media, sports journalists began to publish more articles about it—often with a critical perspective. This example suggests that when there are intriguing socio-political topics, sports journalists presume they will interest readers. Interestingly, sports journalists were not proactive in identifying these topics; rather, they responded to external cues (Laine & Turtiainen, 2018). A similar pattern emerged in our case with the cover story in *HS Kuukausiliite* (Sillanpää, 2018), which garnered extensive coverage and public interest in Finland. Following its publication, sports journalists also began reporting more on similar issues.

Opposing interpretations of consumer interest in socio-political reporting have also been made. A German study by Lünich et al. (2021) revealed that one-quarter of the broadcasting time allocated to the Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics 2016 by German public broadcasters was dedicated to covering the host country's political and economic situation, global issues associated with mega sporting events, such as corruption, and other phenomena presenting broader socio-political contexts. This type of reporting was aired for a total of 10 hours during prime viewing times. However, the research showed that viewers did not desire coverage of such negative phenomena as part of Olympic broadcasts. In fact, the group of viewers who did not follow the Olympics closely reacted even more negatively to problem-focused reporting than sports fans themselves. It appears that extensive socio-political reporting does not attract individuals disinterested in sports to follow the sports broadcasts. Consequently, socio-political reporting may repel consumers, at least from televised sports journalism (Lünich et al., 2021).

We also pondered the often-repeated idea of how much investigative journalism on elite sports happens outside sports media. As this work has begun to shift towards sports departments, there may be a risk that comprehensive journalistic exploration of these phenomena falls solely to people who are already struggling with the flood of sports events, click metrics, and fast-paced desk journalism (Boyle, 2012). Eventually, responding to the evolving landscape of media consumption habits may lead to a decrease in socio-political sports journalism. Delving into societal issues and crafting extensive narratives can prove arduous, as deadlines exist around the clock and large portions of readership prefer shorter content in a fiercely competitive media industry (Laine & Särkivuori, 2023).

5. Conclusion

In this study, our goal was to examine *HS*'s coverage of Jokerit's transition into the Russian KHL league during a few politically turbulent periods. We aimed to understand how the KHL's expansion into the West was perceived as a tool of Russian soft power, particularly within sports journalism. Initially, coverage on the sports pages of *HS* was positive and fan-like, lacking critical socio-political analysis. Such a journalistic approach was rare outside the sports desk. However, the tone shifted over time, notably during the Belarusian crisis in 2020, leading to increased critical discourse on Jokerit's involvement in the KHL, even from sports journalists. This development is reflected in our results, with the sports event frame dominating initially, and gradually shifting towards frames crucial for socio-political analysis, namely the international relations frame as well as the power and governance frame. Nevertheless, this shift was not instigated by sports journalists but was a response to Finland's evolving societal and journalistic climate. The growing recognition of the KHL's significance in Russia's soft power arsenal contributed to this change. Jokerit's participation in the KHL began to feel uneasy as Finland's eastern neighbor adopted increasingly autocratic and aggressive stances towards its neighbors, amidst escalating political crises on its borders.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Joakim Särkivuori (MSc in Social Sciences of Sport) is currently working as a doctoral researcher in the School of Business and Economics at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His doctoral dissertation in leadership and management focuses on elite sports workplaces and their relationship with social sustainability. His other research interests include sports media and sports journalism.



Antti Laine has a PhD in sports science and works as a senior researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Laine's main research area is sports media, and he has the title of docent in journalism, especially sports journalism, at the Tampere University, Finland. In 2023, under the direction of Laine, an extensive, open-access, and peer-reviewed online databank covering Finnish sports journalism was published (Bibliography of Finnish Sports Journalism).