



‘Tell me how you play football and I’ll tell you what your society is like’.  
*Manuel Vázquez Montalbán*

## Introduction

The Football World Cup has established itself as one of the global events with the greatest capacity for social mobilisation, economic impact and media coverage. Its scope transcends the sporting arena, making it a platform where political, economic and cultural interests on an international scale are articulated.

The relationship between sport and geopolitics has become increasingly visible.



Figure 1. The 2026 World Cup. Source: own work

Major football events serve as international showcases through which states project their image, reinforce collective identities and compete for influence in an increasingly interdependent world. They bring together governments, international organisations, businesses, the media and global audiences, all of whom use sport as a vehicle for communication, legitimisation and strategic positioning.

In this context, the 2026 World Cup takes on particular significance. The tournament is being held at a time marked by profound transformations in the international order, characterised by the redistribution of global power, the emergence of new actors, growing competition for influence and the questioning of some of the principles that have underpinned globalisation over recent decades.

The joint organisation by the United States, Mexico and Canada, together with the expansion of the tournament format to 48 national teams, reinforces the political, economic and strategic dimensions of the event.

This paper examines the 2026 World Cup from a geopolitical perspective, with the aim of analysing how an event of this scale not only reflects but also helps to amplify some of the dynamics that characterise the contemporary international landscape.

From this standpoint, both the structural factors framing the tournament and the role played by the various actors involved in its organisation and international projection are analysed.

The aim is to offer an interpretation that places the World Cup within the broader context of the political, economic and symbolic transformations defining the current global moment, understanding the tournament as a space where some of the key tensions of the 21st century converge and become visible: the coexistence of integration and fragmentation, the competition for influence, the redefinition of collective identities, and the growing prominence of non-state actors in global governance.

### **From the game to power: the beautiful game in international relations**

The growing significance of sport in international relations reflects a broader transformation in the way power is exercised in the 21st century<sup>1</sup>.

Football has never been an exclusively sporting phenomenon. Since its modern origins, it has been closely linked to the construction of national identities, the international projection of states, and the political, economic and social transformations of each era. However, in recent decades, its geopolitical importance has increased exponentially, becoming one of the main arenas of symbolic competition within the international system.

This evolution reflects a broader transformation in the nature of power. Against a backdrop of globalisation, hyper-connectivity and an information overload, international influence no longer depends solely on the military capability or economic clout of states. Reputation, the ability to attract investment, the construction of favourable narratives and

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<sup>1</sup> REYES RAMÍREZ, Rocío. Beyond the Pitch: The Battle for Global Influence in the 21st century. IEEE Analysis Paper 75/2024. Available at: [https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/mas\\_ala\\_del\\_terreno\\_de\\_juego](https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/mas_ala_del_terreno_de_juego)

the projection of a positive image abroad have become strategic assets of the highest order.

In this context, sport—and football in particular—occupies a privileged position. Few cultural phenomena possess a comparable capacity to mobilise emotions, generate feelings of belonging and capture the attention of global public opinion.

According to FIFA data<sup>2</sup>, the 2022 World Cup in Qatar reached a cumulative audience of over 5,000 million viewers, whilst the final between Argentina and France was watched by nearly 1,5 billion people<sup>3</sup>. Its ability to transcend borders, languages and ideologies has made football one of the main vehicles of cultural and political influence of our time, with a reach and capacity for mobilisation that far exceed those of most diplomatic summits, institutional campaigns and cultural events.

This capacity for influence can largely be explained by the concept of *soft power*, developed by the American political scientist Joseph S. Nye in the late 20th century. In contrast to *hard power*—which is based on military coercion, economic sanctions or the ability to impose costs on other actors—soft power is underpinned by the ability to attract, persuade and inspire admiration<sup>4</sup>. Culture, education, science, development cooperation and political values are some of its main instruments.

From this perspective, football has become a key tool of public diplomacy. Hosting a World Cup, investing in prestigious clubs, sponsoring international competitions or promoting the internationalisation of a national league helps to bolster a country's international image, increase its global visibility, attract investment, boost tourism and consolidate its capacity for influence.

However, it is important to distinguish between *soft power* and one of the concepts that has come to the fore in recent years: *sportswashing*. Although the two terms are related, they are not synonymous.

*Sportswashing* can be defined as the strategic use of sport to improve the international reputation of governments or actors facing criticism for human rights violations,

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<sup>2</sup> International Federation of Association Football.

<sup>3</sup> FIFA. 'FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™ reached 5 billion viewers'. 16/12/23. Available at: <https://inside.fifa.com/tournament-organisation/audience-reports/qatar-2022>

<sup>4</sup> NYE, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York, PublicAffairs, 2004.

Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 21 June 2026.

democratic deficits or controversial foreign policy actions<sup>5</sup>. In other words, it is a specific and controversial form of soft power aimed at diverting attention from certain reputational issues.

All *sportswashing* constitutes a soft power strategy, but not every soft power strategy involves *sportswashing*. Hosting a major sporting event, for example, may serve legitimate objectives such as economic diversification, attracting investment, modernising infrastructure or strengthening a country's brand. The debate arises when these objectives coexist with an explicit desire to counter international criticism or improve the image of regimes under scrutiny.

However, the political instrumentalisation of football is far from a recent phenomenon. One of the earliest paradigmatic examples was the 1934 World Cup in Italy. Benito Mussolini quickly grasped the tournament's propaganda potential and turned the competition into a tool for the internal legitimisation and external projection of the fascist regime. The tournament was carefully designed to project an image of modernity, efficiency and national strength. The Italian national team's victory was intended to demonstrate, both at home and abroad, the supposed superiority of the fascist model<sup>6</sup>.

The political use of sport reached new heights during the Cold War. Both the United States and the Soviet Union realised that sporting success was an effective way of demonstrating the superiority of their respective political and economic models. The Olympic Games became a prime arena for ideological competition, as reflected in the reciprocal boycotts of the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Games.

In Latin America, the best-known example is the 1978 World Cup in Argentina. The military junta led by Jorge Rafael Videla exploited the tournament to attempt to project an image of institutional normality and reinforce its international legitimacy in a context marked by systematic repression, enforced disappearances and human rights violations<sup>7</sup>.

However, the World Cup in Argentina also highlighted the limitations of the political instrumentalisation of sport. The mass influx of foreign journalists and the activities of human rights organisations helped to bring international attention to the allegations

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<sup>5</sup> GRIX, Jonathan and BRANNAGAN, Paul Michael. 'Of Mechanisms and Myths: Conceptualising States' "Soft Power" Strategies through Sports Mega-Events', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2016, pp. 251–272.

<sup>6</sup> MARTIN, Simon. *Football and Fascism: The National Game under Mussolini*. Oxford, Berg, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> ALABARCES, Pablo. *Football and the Fatherland: Football and Narratives of the Nation in Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Prometeo Libros, 2002.

against the dictatorship<sup>8</sup>. The Navy Mechanics School (ESMA), one of the regime's main clandestine detention and torture centres, was located just a few kilometres from the Monumental Stadium, where Argentina won the World Cup.

This case demonstrates that major sporting events not only serve to project power, but can also become spaces for political resistance and for bringing conflicts to the fore.

Football also acts as a unique mirror of social and geopolitical tensions. The match between Dinamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade in May 1990, marked by serious disturbances amongst supporters, foreshadowed the deterioration of relations between Croats and Serbs and became one of the symbols of Yugoslavia's disintegration<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, matches such as those between the United States and Iran or between the two Koreas have transcended the sporting arena to take on a clear diplomatic dimension.

Football can also play a significant role in processes of nation-building and international projection. A notable example was the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the first to be held on the African continent. Beyond the pitches and stadiums, the tournament provided an opportunity to present the country as a consolidated democracy and a regional power capable of successfully organising one of the largest international events.

The South African government viewed the World Cup as a tool to strengthen national cohesion, project an image of modernity and continental leadership, and consolidate the political legacy of the post-apartheid transition initiated by Nelson Mandela<sup>10</sup>. The competition also symbolised Africa's growing presence in international governance and helped to challenge the traditional perception of the continent as a region associated exclusively with instability or underdevelopment.

However, the South African case also highlighted the contradictions inherent in major sporting events. Alongside the positive impact on the country's international image, debates arose regarding the high cost of infrastructure, persistent social inequalities and the tournament's actual capacity to generate sustainable benefits for the local population.

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<sup>8</sup> FINCHELSTEIN, Federico. *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth-Century Argentina*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> FOER, Franklin. *How Football Explains the World*. New York, Harper Perennial, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> CARLIN, John. *The Human Factor: Nelson Mandela and the Match That Saved a Nation*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2009. CORNELISSEN, Scarlett. 'The Geopolitics of Global Aspiration: Sport Mega-Events and Emerging Powers', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 27, nos. 16–18, 2010, pp. 3008–3025.

This tension between international visibility and domestic demands has, since then, become a constant feature of major football events.

The geopolitics of football is not, however, limited to the actions of states. The globalisation of the sports industry and its increasing financialization<sup>11</sup> have considerably expanded the number of actors involved. Sovereign wealth funds, media conglomerates, digital platforms, technology companies and major investment groups are now competing to control a sector that generates enormous economic profits, but also extraordinary symbolic capital.

At the same time, football has become a tool for asserting identity for actors who lack a fully recognised state or who seek to bolster their international visibility. Cases such as those of Palestine, Kosovo and Curaçao demonstrate that sport can function as a mechanism for symbolic recognition and international visibility for communities whose presence in international institutions is limited.

All of this has transformed football into a prime arena for observing the key dynamics of the contemporary international order: the competition for prestige, the contest over global narratives, the emergence of new centres of power, the growing relevance of non-state actors, and the tensions between globalisation and sovereignty.

Consequently, analysing football from a geopolitical perspective does not mean reducing it to a mere propaganda tool. Rather, it means recognising that major sporting events are arenas where economic interests, diplomatic strategies, claims to identity and power projects converge.

### **FIFA and the new geopolitics of football**

This analysis of the geopolitical dimension of football requires us to focus not only on states, clubs or major investors, but also on the institution that coordinates and regulates this global ecosystem: FIFA.

For decades, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association presented itself as a strictly sporting organisation, committed to the universal promotion of football and

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<sup>11</sup> Financialisation describes an economic phenomenon in which profits are increasingly generated through financial channels rather than through the production and trade of traditional goods and services.

uninvolved in political disputes. However, the sport's growing economic, media and symbolic importance has profoundly transformed its role, turning it into a transnational actor with considerable influence.

Football's governing body is a unique case within global governance. With 211 affiliated federations—more than the member states of the United Nations—it has a network of representation that surpasses that of most international organisations and gives it a virtually universal presence<sup>12</sup>. This structure enables it to act simultaneously as a sporting regulator, an economic agent, a content producer, a major events organiser and a diplomatic actor.

The central role of the World Cup within FIFA's business model explains much of its capacity for influence. Broadcasting rights, sponsorship contracts, commercial licences and ticket sales have turned the World Cup into a global product of enormous economic, media and strategic value<sup>13</sup>. Its significance, however, goes beyond the economic dimension. Control of the tournament grants it a privileged position within the governance of world sport and a remarkable ability to influence political decisions.

Over the past few decades, the organisation has built a model of transnational governance based on its ability to set rules, define standards and negotiate directly with host nations. This model is underpinned by a paradox: although FIFA has no territory, army or formal coercive power, it has managed to exert significant influence over public policy in numerous countries.

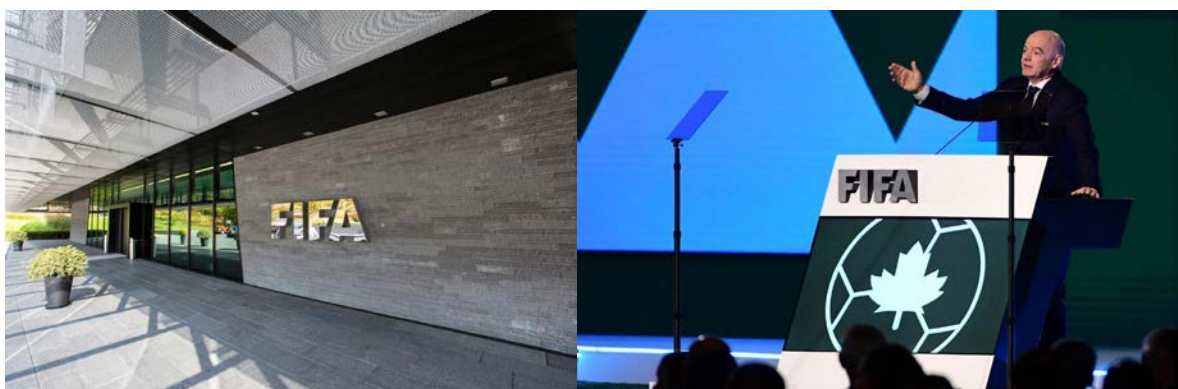


Figure 2. FIFA headquarters. Source: ©Jetlinerimages

Figure 3. Gianni Infantino, FIFA President. Source: AFP

<sup>12</sup> FIFA. 'Member Associations'. Available at: <https://inside.fifa.com/associations>.

<sup>13</sup> FIFA. 'Annual Report 2025'. Op. cit.

Governments aspiring to host a World Cup make commitments that go far beyond the strictly sporting sphere. The Federation routinely demands state guarantees on issues as diverse as taxation, security, international mobility, the protection of intellectual property, the adaptation of regulatory frameworks and the construction of infrastructure<sup>14</sup>. In practice, this means that states agree to adjust certain policies and regulatory frameworks to meet the needs of a private organisation, drawn by the benefits of all kinds associated with the tournament.

This ability to influence sovereign decisions has led various authors to define FIFA as a form of “global private governance”<sup>15</sup>: a non-state actor which, without possessing traditional coercive instruments, exerts effective influence over governments, companies and societies on an international scale. However, this relationship has never been balanced nor free from tensions.

The organisation’s history shows that its supposed political neutrality has been largely a discursive construct. FIFA has had to manage such sensitive issues as the international recognition of certain territories, sanctions arising from armed conflicts, diplomatic boycotts and disputes over national symbols.

The admission of Kosovo as a full member in 2016, despite opposition from Serbia and several states that do not recognise its independence, highlighted how sporting decisions can have far-reaching diplomatic implications<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, Russia’s exclusion from international competitions following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 confirmed that FIFA cannot remain on the sidelines of major contemporary geopolitical crises<sup>17</sup>.

The very composition of its membership reflects the complexities of the international order. Federations such as those of Palestine, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico and Curaçao demonstrate how football can provide visibility and symbolic recognition to territories with varying degrees of sovereignty or political autonomy.

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<sup>14</sup> HORNE, John and MANZENREITER, Wolfram. ‘Sports Mega-Events: Social Scientific Analyses of a Global Phenomenon’, *The Sociological Review*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2006, pp. 1–24.

<sup>15</sup> PIELKE J.R., Roger. ‘How Can FIFA Be Held Accountable?’, *Sport Management Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2013, pp. 255–267.

<sup>16</sup> REUTERS. ‘FIFA admits Kosovo and Gibraltar as new members’. 13 May 2016. Available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/soccer-fifa-kosovo-idINKCN0Y40MH>

<sup>17</sup> ‘FIFA/UEFA suspend Russian clubs and national teams from all competitions’. 28 February 2022. Available at:

<https://inside.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/qatar2022/media-releases/fifa-uefa-suspend-russian-clubs-and-national-teams-from-all-competitions>

At the same time, FIFA has been the subject of recurring criticism for its relationship with authoritarian governments and for the apparent contradiction between its discourse based on universal values and its strategic decisions.

The hosting of the 2018 World Cup in Russia and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, as well as the selection of Saudi Arabia to host the 2034 World Cup, has intensified the debate over the influence of economic and geopolitical interests on the governance of international football. These decisions have reinforced the perception that FIFA not only reflects changes in the global order but also plays an active part in shaping them.

As previously noted, the emergence of Gulf sovereign wealth funds, the expansion of new audiovisual markets and competition to attract investment have progressively shifted football's economic centre of gravity towards regions that, until a few decades ago, occupied a peripheral position.

Against this backdrop, FIFA faces an increasingly complex challenge: to preserve its aspiration to govern a global sport in a world marked by political fragmentation, competition between powers and the resurgence of sovereigntists ideologies.

Although the organisation continues to project an image of universality and neutrality, its decisions are shaped by economic interests, regional balances and geopolitical dynamics that extend beyond the strictly sporting sphere.

More than just an international federation, it has become an actor that negotiates with governments, interacts with major corporations, manages diplomatic sensitivities and plays a part in shaping global narratives.

The 2026 World Cup represents the culmination of this process: an expanded tournament, jointly organised by three countries and designed to maximise its global reach in an international context marked by political fragmentation and competition between major powers.

### **The 2026 World Cup: the new paradigm for the World Cup**

The 2026 World Cup has already made football history even before the qualifying rounds have been played. The tournament, hosted jointly by the United States, Mexico and

Canada, is the most ambitious edition ever organised by FIFA and marks a turning point in the evolution of world football.

For the first time, 48 national teams are taking part, and the total number of matches has increased from 64 to 104<sup>18</sup>. However, these figures do not merely reflect an expansion of the competition format. Above all, they reflect a deeper transformation in the way football is understood, in FIFA's strategic priorities and in the very distribution of power within the global football ecosystem.

The organisation justifies this reform by appealing to the universality of the sport and the need to broaden the tournament's geographical representation. Thanks to the new system, historically under-represented regions, such as Africa, Asia and CONCACAF<sup>19</sup>, have significantly increased their presence in the final tournament<sup>20</sup>.

But the underlying debate goes far beyond the allocation of places. The expansion of the World Cup is a response to a central question: who defines the rules of global football today, and which regions will shape its future?



Figure 4. The growing global presence of the FIFA World Cup. Source: Statista

<sup>18</sup> FIFA. "FIFA World Cup 2026™: Match Schedule and Host Cities". Available at: <https://www.fifa.com/en/tournaments/mens/worldcup/canadamexicousa2026>

<sup>19</sup> A football confederation comprising North America, Central America and the Caribbean, responsible for organising competitions and promoting football in the region.

<sup>20</sup> FIFA. 'Allocation of FIFA World Cup 2026 slots'. Available at: <https://inside.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/canadamexicousa2026/media-releases/fifa-council-confirms-allocation-of-spots-for-the-expanded-fifa-world-cup>

Throughout its history, the World Cup has been dominated by Europe and South America. Between them, these two regions account for all the World Cup titles, the most powerful leagues and the lion's share of revenue generated by the football industry. However, demographic, economic and technological growth in other regions is gradually shifting this balance.

FIFA is aware that the future of football no longer depends exclusively on traditional markets. Whilst Europe remains the main centre of sporting and economic activity, the growth in global viewership is taking place in regions such as Africa, Asia and the Middle East, where a younger population, increasing digital connectivity and the expansion of the middle classes offer enormous consumer potential.

According to United Nations projections, Africa will account for more than a quarter of the world's population by 2050, whilst Asia will remain the world's largest market for digital users<sup>21</sup>.

The expansion of the World Cup may, to a large extent, be a response to this reality. It is no coincidence that the Confederation of African Football has seen its number of direct qualifying places rise from five to nine, nor that Asia has significantly increased its representation. Nor is it a coincidence that CONCACAF is playing an increasingly prominent role, driven by the central role played by the United States, Mexico and Canada as hosts of the tournament.

The redistribution of places reflects football's gradual adaptation to an increasingly multipolar world. Influence no longer depends solely on sporting performance, but also on the demographic, economic and media clout of each region.

The case of Curaçao is particularly significant. Its participation not only raises the international profile of a small territory with limited sovereignty but also demonstrates how football can act as a tool for political affirmation and international visibility.

However, this geographical opening coexists with another, less visible reality: the growing commercialisation of football.

Each new national team added means more matches, more broadcasting rights, more sponsorship deals and greater opportunities for commercial exploitation. The expansion

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<sup>21</sup> UNITED NATIONS. 'World Population Prospects 2024'. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

of the World Cup is driven as much by a logic of inclusion as by a strategy of economic expansion.

In line with the above, the World Cup has established itself as FIFA's main economic and symbolic asset. According to the financial report for the 2023–2026 cycle, revenue from broadcasting rights constitutes the organisation's main source of funding, ahead of sponsorship and commercial licensing<sup>22</sup>.

In this context, the expansion of the World Cup reflects a broader trend: the transformation of football into a global entertainment industry<sup>23</sup>.

This process is being accelerated by the emergence of new technology players competing for viewers' attention. Digital platforms, streaming services and social media have changed the way sport is consumed and have forced FIFA to adapt its product to a fragmented and constantly connected global audience.

The choice of North America as the tournament's host also follows this logic.

The United States is the world's largest audiovisual market and represents a strategic opportunity for FIFA. Although football does not yet occupy the central position it holds in Europe or Latin America, its popularity has grown steadily over recent decades, driven by the increase in the Hispanic population, the expansion of Major League Soccer and the growing demand for international sports content.

In this regard, the 2026 World Cup aims to firmly establish football within the American sporting ecosystem and to strengthen FIFA's presence in one of the world's most attractive markets.

But the transformation of the tournament is not limited to its economic dimension. It also affects the very model for organising major sporting events.

The growing logistical and financial complexity of the World Cup makes it increasingly difficult for a single country to bear the costs and demands associated with hosting it on its own. The increase in the number of host cities, investment in infrastructure, security requirements and pressure on public services are fuelling the rise of joint bids.

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<sup>22</sup> FIFA. 'Annual Report 2025'. Available at: <https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/annual-report-2025>

<sup>23</sup> DELOITTE. *Annual Review of Football Finance 2025*. Available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/>

The 2026 World Cup thus marks the beginning of a new era characterised by the multinational organisation of major sporting events, a trend that will continue in 2030 with a tournament spread across Europe, Africa and South America.

This new model offers clear advantages in terms of cost-sharing and the utilisation of existing infrastructure, but it also poses significant challenges relating to institutional coordination, environmental sustainability and territorial cohesion.

The geographical dispersion of the host cities, the increase in international travel and the complexity of managing a tournament spread across three countries make this World Cup a veritable testing ground for transnational governance.

Finally, this edition of the tournament is accelerating the transformation of the fan experience.

The introduction of dynamic pricing systems, the expansion of *premium* experiences, the integration of digital content and the segmentation of the offering reflect the growing influence of the American professional sports business model.

High ticket prices, rising costs associated with accommodation and transport between venues, as well as the proliferation of exclusive hospitality packages, have fuelled the debate over the risk that the World Cup is evolving towards a model geared towards the affluent global consumer, rather than the traditional fan<sup>24</sup>.

The paradox is clear: the 2026 World Cup is, at the same time, the most inclusive and the most exclusive in history.

Never before have so many countries had the opportunity to take part in a World Cup, yet never before has it been so expensive to watch the tournament from the stands. FIFA has broadened access to the pitch, but not necessarily to the stadium.

The tension between universality and profitability is probably one of the main dilemmas facing contemporary football. Beyond the sporting results, the 2026 World Cup is redefining who participates, who organises, who consumes and who benefits from the planet's premier footballing event.

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<sup>24</sup> ONDA CERO. 'How does dynamic pricing for World Cup tickets work?'. 12 June 2026. Available at: [https://www.ondacero.es/deportes/futbol/mundial-futbol/como-funciona-precio-dinamico-entradas-mundial\\_202606126a2c38a90d35a17610aeeeeac.html](https://www.ondacero.es/deportes/futbol/mundial-futbol/como-funciona-precio-dinamico-entradas-mundial_202606126a2c38a90d35a17610aeeeeac.html); EL PAÍS. 'The 2026 World Cup sends ticket prices soaring and redefines the fan experience'. June 2026.

Ultimately, the tournament currently taking place in North America is not only transforming football: it also reflects the key tensions of the contemporary international order, characterised by the redistribution of power, competition for global audiences and the growing commodification of the sporting experience.

### **A battleground: power, integration and divisions in North America**

Whilst the 2026 World Cup is redefining football on a global scale, its hosting in North America reveals the extent to which these transformations clash with political, border-related and social realities that profoundly shape the tournament's development. What, from a global perspective, appears to be a process of expansion, diversification and commercialisation of football becomes, on the ground, a space of contention where security agendas, migration tensions, diplomatic rivalries and regional integration dynamics converge.

The tournament is taking place against a backdrop of tighter border controls, growing social polarisation and the resurgence of nationalist rhetoric that challenges some of the principles upon which North American integration has been built over recent decades.



Figure 5. Sixteen host cities across three countries. Source: Goals4sports.com

Relations between the three host countries are also going through one of their most complex periods in recent times. Trade tensions between Washington and Ottawa, disputes over immigration and the threat of new tariffs have turned the tournament into a forum where rivalries and agendas that go beyond the competitive arena are played out.

Although they are jointly organising the tournament, each country aims to promote its own narrative. The United States seeks to establish itself as the major economic and organisational hub of world football; Mexico aims to strengthen its role as a regional player and a bridge between North America and Latin America; and Canada is seeking to present itself as an open, diverse and welcoming society.

In these circumstances, the issue of mobility has become one of the tournament's main challenges.

FIFA's aspiration to make the tournament a global and inclusive event contrasts with the growing restrictions on international mobility imposed by the host nations, a situation that has been evident since the early days of the tournament<sup>25</sup>. Raids by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in various cities and the new entry restrictions imposed on citizens of certain countries have caused concern amongst fans, journalists and human rights organisations<sup>26</sup>.

For many groups of supporters, these measures not only act as a deterrent but also call into question the very promise of a World Cup conceived as a space for transnational encounter.

The case of the Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan<sup>27</sup>, who was detained for hours at Miami airport and ultimately turned away due to alleged irregularities in immigration checks, has become one of the most emblematic examples of this tension. Although FIFA guaranteed full payment of the fees due for his appointment, the incident highlighted the ability of host states to impose their security priorities even on individuals accredited by the tournament organisers themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> ZIMBALIST, Andrew. *Circus Maximus: The Economic Gamble Behind Hosting the Olympics and the World Cup\**. Brookings Institution Press, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE); AS. "Donald Trump: Will the US government carry out ICE raids during the 2026 World Cup?" 15 June 2026. Available at: <https://as.com/us/actualidad/donald-trump-gobierno-de-estados-unidos-realizara-redadas-del-ice-durante-el-mundial-2026-f202606-n>

<sup>27</sup> FIFA WORLD CUP 2026. "Information on visas and travel".

<https://www.fifa.com/en/tournaments/mens/worldcup/canadamexicousa2026/fan-information/travel-and-visa>

The Artan case is not an isolated incident. During the early days of the tournament, journalists and delegation members from Africa, Asia and the Middle East reported delays, lengthy interrogations and additional checks at US airports. Beyond the operational inconveniences, these events have reignited a fundamental debate on inequality in international mobility and the impact of visa regimes on the governance of global sport.

The situation in Iran has added a further geopolitical dimension to the tournament. The escalating tension between Tehran and Washington, exacerbated by the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East, has turned every match involving the Iranian national team into a political focal point. The Iranian authorities demanded greater assurances from FIFA to prevent the display of symbols linked to opposition to the regime and expressed concern about the possibility of incidents or chants deemed offensive occurring during the matches<sup>28</sup>.

At the same time, groups from the Iranian diaspora have organised rallies and protests in cities such as Toronto, Houston and Los Angeles, capitalising on the tournament's visibility to draw international attention to the pro-democracy demonstrations in their country. FIFA, facing pressure from various quarters, has stepped up security protocols surrounding Iran's matches and has emphasised the need to preserve the competition's political neutrality.

This incident has reignited a recurring debate about the organisation's role in contexts of high international tension. Although FIFA asserts its autonomy and institutional neutrality, the growing politicisation of sport is forcing the organisation to manage conflicts that go beyond the strictly footballing sphere and which test its ability to act as an arbiter of conflicting political interests.

Mexico has not escaped this climate of uncertainty either. Although the host cities of Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey have deployed extensive security measures, the persistence of violence linked to organised crime has affected preparations for the tournament. Months before the World Cup began, various clashes between criminal

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Soccer Federation; MATHESON, Victor and BAADE, Robert. " : Mega-Sporting Events in Developing Nations: Playing the Way to Prosperity?", *South African Journal of Economics*, vol. 79. 2011.

groups and security force operations targeting prominent drug trafficking leaders reignited the debate over the country's ability to guarantee the event's security<sup>29</sup>.

The Mexican authorities responded with an unprecedented deployment of police and military personnel, as well as technological surveillance systems. However, some analysts suggest that the relative reduction in certain violent incidents observed since the start of the tournament could be due, at least in part, to a temporary strategy by criminal groups aimed at avoiding further government pressure and taking advantage of the economic opportunities arising from the tournament<sup>30</sup>.

Beyond security in the strict sense, the World Cup has also highlighted the ability of criminal organisations to adapt to the spaces created by major international events.

In Monterrey and Guadalajara, the authorities have detected attempts by actors linked to illicit economies to control activities such as informal parking, certain transport services or street vending in the vicinity of the venues. Although these dynamics have not affected the running of the matches, they illustrate how a major sporting event can become a space for economic and territorial dispute that transcends the strictly footballing sphere.

Far from being an exception, this phenomenon confirms a trend observed at other major international events: the concentration of people, resources and investment generates opportunities that can be exploited by institutional actors as well as by informal or criminal networks.

Canada, for its part, has used the tournament to reinforce a national identity based on diversity, multiculturalism and openness to the world. Against a backdrop of trade tensions with the United States and Donald Trump's rhetoric regarding a hypothetical incorporation of Canada as the '51st state'<sup>31</sup>, the World Cup has become a platform for political and identity-based affirmation.

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<sup>29</sup> Government of Mexico – 2026 FIFA World Cup; EL PAÍS. "Mexico uses the World Cup to boost its international profile". June 2026. <https://www.gob.mx/cms/mundial2026>

<sup>30</sup> GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. 'FIFA World Cup 2026 Host Programme'. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/funding/fifa-world-cup-2026.html>; CBC NEWS. 'Canada seeks to define its identity on the global stage during the World Cup'. June 2026. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-identity-world-stage-world-cup-2026-1.7234987>

<sup>31</sup> EL IMPARCIAL. Donald Trump referred to Prime Minister Mark Carney as 'the future governor of Canada', in a fresh allusion to his desire for the neighbouring country to become the 51st state of the United States. 10 April 2026. Available at: <https://www.elimparcial.com/mundo/2026/03/11/donald-trump-se-refirio-al-primer-ministro-mark-carney-como-el-futuro-gobernador-de-canada-en-una-new-reference-to-his-desire-for-the-neighbouring-country-to-become-the-51st-state-of-the-united-states>

The statements by head coach Jesse Marsch, publicly criticising these remarks, and the growing sense of unity generated around the Canadian national team illustrate how sport can act as an instrument of internal cohesion and national differentiation. In this regard, Ottawa is using the tournament as a tool for political and symbolic differentiation from the United States, reinforcing its own national narrative at a time of growing bilateral tension.

In cities such as Vancouver and Toronto, local authorities have presented the tournament as an opportunity to boost Canada's international profile and consolidate a narrative based on diversity and intercultural coexistence. This public diplomacy strategy reinforces Canada's desire to distinguish itself from its regional partners and to consolidate its own international identity.

The Canadian experience highlights that major sporting events not only enable states to gain international visibility, but also to construct narratives about themselves and define their position vis-à-vis their neighbours and strategic partners.

As in previous editions, the competition has not been immune to social protest. Although the protests have been limited and have not disrupted the tournament, various organisations have taken advantage of the media attention to denounce US immigration policies, the high cost of tickets or certain international crises<sup>32</sup>.

In Los Angeles and New York, groups of temporary workers have organised demonstrations to denounce working conditions in sectors linked to the World Cup, whilst environmental groups have criticised the tournament's energy impact and the increase in air traffic between host cities.

These circumstances highlight a paradox that is hard to ignore: the most international World Cup in history is taking place against a backdrop in which global mobility is increasingly constrained by security considerations, nationality and unequal access to visa schemes. The tournament thus reflects one of the central tensions of our time: the increasingly complex balance between globalisation and national sovereignty.

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<sup>32</sup> THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR. "As the World Cup nears, controversies over ticket prices, team and fan access still swirl". 8 June 2026. Available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2026/0608/world-cup-2026-ticket-prices-iran-immigration-enforcement-ice>

## Conclusions

The organisation of the 2026 World Cup reflects one of the fundamental tensions of the current international order: whilst global interdependencies are increasing, the forces of fragmentation and withdrawal are also intensifying.

Never before has a World Cup reached such a high degree of globalisation. The increase in the number of participating teams, the proliferation of host cities and the presence of a growing number of actors capable of influencing its organisation all bear witness to this expansion. However, this openness coexists with a context marked by the tightening of borders, competition between national narratives, the securitisation of mobility and the difficulty in coordinating collective responses to transnational challenges.

The uniqueness of the 2026 World Cup lies not solely in its expansion to 48 teams nor in its joint organisation by the United States, Mexico and Canada. Its significance lies in the fact that it is the first major sporting event fully embedded in a transitional international order, characterised by the coexistence of seemingly contradictory dynamics: openness and withdrawal, cooperation and rivalry, interdependence and the reaffirmation of sovereignty.

In this sense, the tournament functions as a veritable geopolitical laboratory. The redistribution of places to Africa, Asia and CONCACAF reflects the gradual shift in the global demographic and economic centre of gravity. Migration tensions and security challenges in North America highlight the limits of globalisation against a backdrop of growing political fragmentation.

The influence of FIFA and other non-state actors confirms the consolidation of new forms of transnational governance, whilst competition for audiences, markets and narratives highlights the centrality of symbolic power in contemporary international relations.

The 2026 World Cup also demonstrates that today's geopolitics is no longer shaped solely by diplomatic summits, multilateral institutions or conflict zones. It is also shaped in arenas capable of capturing global attention, mobilising collective identities and projecting narratives with a global reach.

For this reason, the significance of this World Cup extends beyond the realm of football. Its analytical value lies in the fact that it allows us to observe, in real time, some of the trends that are redefining the international order: the redistribution of global power, the tension between integration and sovereignty, the growing influence of non-state actors, and the competition for legitimacy and attention in an environment that is simultaneously interconnected and fragmented.

Football remains a game, but the World Cups have long since ceased to be mere events of an exclusively competitive nature. Today, they constitute a unique tool for understanding the transformations in global power.

Consequently, understanding the geopolitics of the 2026 World Cup is also a way of understanding the geopolitics of the emerging world.

Whilst millions of people watch the ball, geopolitics—inevitably—continues to play out its own match.

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