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**Pugilism, power, and the cultural politics of celebrity: Charting Vitali Klitschko's rise from
heavyweight champion to Mayor of Kiev**
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Abstract

Research into sport and international relations represents a growing area of academic study. However, in this period, a gap has emerged in the literature relating to former athletes entering the sphere of politics, highlighting a connection between understandings of power, consumer-based economics, and the cultural phenomenon of celebrity. This article sets out to narrate these ideas by analysing the political rise of Vitali Klitschko, the former WBC heavyweight champion of the world, to the post of Mayor of Kiev. In so doing, the paper explains 'Klitschko's rise to political office by unpacking the relationship between celebrity and technologies of power in liquid modernity by connecting this process of social control to neoliberal economics. Through this lens, Klitschko's role in Ukrainian politics is understood to represent a broader geopolitical power struggle between the synoptic power structures of the West and an authoritarian approach to governance backed by the Kremlin.

Keywords: Boxing; Politics; Celebrity; Synopticism; International Relations

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Introduction

Vitali Klitschko's election to the post of Mayor of Kiev on the 5th of June 2014 generated significant interest among media outlets and boxing fans worldwide (Graham, 2018). To a considerable degree, this attention stemmed from the sight of one of the most dominant heavyweight champions in the last quarter of a century entering mainstream politics. An event that not only signified Klitschko's arrival on the political stage but also continued the historical bond between boxing and politics forged by figures such as Muhammad Ali (Farred, 1995), who used the status accrued from being champion to challenge social injustices connected to racial oppression (Marqusee, 1999; Saeed, 2002). While Klitschko's entrance into the political sphere maintains this connection, it is important to mention that he is also charting new ground as a legislative decision-maker. This point is evidenced in policies such as implementing an innovative new bike riding scheme to tackle pollution in Kiev and the enforcement of mask-wearing and social distancing in the city to reduce the spread of Covid-19 (Davies, 2020; Dickinson, 2020). The use of such legislative powers demonstrates how Klitschko's profile has grown beyond that of a celebrity sporting icon or symbol of protest, setting him apart from athletes of yesteryear in the way he has entered the political sphere as a policymaker as opposed to a social activist.

However, research into Klitschko's political rise has been absent from the cognate fields of sport management and sport studies despite significant media interest. The reason for this lack of attention is perplexing, given the exiting literature surrounding sport and celebrity that has documented the global reach of sports stars and their role as central figures driving the commercialised world of contemporary consumer culture (Gilchrist, 2005; Smart, 2005; Riches et al., 2017; Law, Bloyce and Waddington, 2020). Equally, the growing literature emerging on sports relationship with international relations (Levemore and Budd, 2004; Sassenberg, Summers, Johnson-Morgan, and Hassan, 2018), international development and mega-events yields no mention of Klitschko's move into the sphere of politics (Giulianotti, Hognestad, and Spaaij, 2016). All of this, despite growing academic interest in athletes' roles as cultural ambassadors (Dichter and Johns, 2014), highlighted most prominently in the work of Mike Lee (2006) on figures such as David Beckham and Sebastien Coe during the London 2012 Olympic bid in 2005. Or, more recently, in the way authoritarian regimes have enlisted elite athletes to legitimise their power, as in the case of

the Belarussian Cyclist Natalia Tsyhinskaya who was chosen to help re-write her country's constitution. This move has come to be understood within the broader political narrative as a scheme designed to solidify the autocratic values of current President Alexander Lukashenko (BELTA, 2021), highlighting how authoritarian regimes have found themselves using the cultural sphere of sport and the adoration directed towards top athletes to further their political ends.

This paper seeks to add a new dimension to the existing literature on sport, celebrity, and international relations by exploring structural changes in how power is operationalised in consumer-based societies and how these changes permit a sporting celebrity like Vitali Klitschko to ascend to political office. To this end, the paper starts by narrating the relationship between power, freedom, and consumerism, which unpacks the theoretical ideas of Zygmunt Bauman (2000) and his writings on liquid modernity. Here, the reader is introduced to the cultural changes instigated by the liberalisation of advanced industrial economies and how this has altered the systemic workings of power. This analysis puts forward an argument that seeks to narrate how the top-down bureaucratic structure inherent with panoptic control has been replaced by a synoptic method, where power flows from the bottom up. Through this lens, the paper charts Klitschko's ascension from a figurehead of 'The Orange Revolution' in 2004 to his election to political office in 2014. While connecting his political ascent to the geopolitical situation in Ukraine, where the country's liminal position between the West and Russia makes for a thought-provoking discussion into the different methods of control implemented by liberal western democracies and authoritarian oligarchs backed by the Kremlin (D'Anieri, 2014).

Power, freedom, and the metamorphosis of modernity

Since the late 1980s, political thinkers have written about a shift in the social, cultural, and political fabric of advanced industrial countries in the West and emerging economic centres in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. These ideas, despite being communicated using different pretexts, whether that be late modernity (Habermas, 1985); reflexive modernity (Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1994); or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), have sought to narrate the effects of neoliberal economic policies and the growing interconnectedness of the world economy to philosophical ideas on power, freedom, and social control. Zygmunt Bauman's (2000; 2007; 2011) work charts this metamorphosis by

using the metaphors of solid and liquid to describe this social transformation. Here, the use of such allegorical phrases helps explain societies transition from a state of solid modernity, built around a top-down bureaucratic system designed to order production-based economies, to a liquified form of modernity. In liquid modernity, power is implemented through the precariousness of excessive individualisation, causing members of the polis to seek role models to follow to help them navigate the changing social world in front of them (Bauman and Haugaard, 2008).

Bauman (2000) ties these changes to a myriad of political events that came to a head in the late 1980s. The first charts the emergence of the New Right, a political ideology understood today through the rubric of neoliberalism. This philosophy, built around the Austrian socialist thinker Friedrich Von Hayek (1944), warns about the perils of excessive government intervention instigating a 'road to 'serfdom', subverting personal freedoms and civil liberties in the process. The other architect, Milton Friedman (1992), a prominent researcher at the Chicago School of Economics, advocated fiscal discipline regarding economic spending, coining the term monetarism to promote the privatisation of state-run industries, services, and utilities. Together, these ideas have collectively sought to instigate the workings of an economic system that has rolled back the institutions of the state from the public sphere, reducing welfare provision while simultaneously opening financial markets to private investment (Bauman, 2011). In the realm of sport, these changes have accelerated the commodification of major sports leagues like the English Premier League and Indian Premier League, causing the teams that compete in these federations to operate as corporate entities (Sassenberg et al., 2018).

The second aspect to which Bauman refers is the collapse of Communism as a political alternative to capitalism, articulated poignantly through the dismantling of the Berlin wall in 1989. This moment brought an end to the century-old debate about which political metanarrative would guide global civilisation into the new millennium (Bauman, 2007). The fallout from which fermented a distinct break with the past, a point articulated by the social theorist Francis Fukuyama (1992) as 'the end of 'history'. To put this another way, the collapse of the Berlin wall served to demonstrate how economic liberalism had prevailed over state-centred collectivism as the dominant political paradigm guiding human civilization. Significantly, this movement has helped reorder the world around the values of

freedom, consumption, and individualisation. In view of this situation, Bauman (2006) set out to provide critical insights into such values, namely the dialectics of living with excessive amounts of freedom and how extreme liberty has influenced human interaction and instigated new methods of social control.

To explore this phenomenon further, Bauman (1998) engages with the writings of Isaiah Berlin (1969) and Erich Fromm (2001) to examine the pitfalls of excessive liberty on the human psyche. Through this line of thinking, he argues that the underpinning ideology of neoliberalism conceptualises freedom in a one-dimensional manner, promoting excessive individualisation at the expense of ontological security provided by democratic state institutions. In other words, economic liberals conceptualise such security as:

Disempowering, disabling, breeding the 'resented' 'dependency' and altogether constraining the human 'agents' freedom. What this passes over in silence is that acrobatics and rope walking without a safety net are an art few people can master and a recipe for disaster for all the rest. Take away security and freedom is the first casualty. (Bauman and Tester, 2001, p.52)

The fallout places responsibility onto the individual, instigating a form of 'negative freedom' whereby men and women are encouraged to make personalised decisions on how best to navigate the social world around them. Decisions that, for the most part, they are reluctant to make, leaving them looking to the actions of others as a guide to help them navigate society (Bauman, 2005).

Precarization and the rise of the tough guys: The 'viewer society' and synoptic control

The contours of this evolution in the structures of power connect with the Norwegian Criminologist Thomas Mathiesen (1997) and his concept of 'the viewer society', developed as a critique of Foucault's (1977) writings on panopticism. Here, both Mathiesen (1997) and Bauman (2000) argue that the neoliberal ideology of excessive individualisation has fermented a new method of social control, which works from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down. Accordingly, synoptic power operates through the many watching the actions of the few rather than the few watching the actions of the many. An idea communicated by Bauman (2000, p.30) below:

It is now your task to watch the swelling ranks of Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and watch them closely and avidly, in the hope of finding something useful for yourself: an example to imitate or a word of advice about how to cope with your problems, which, like their problems, need to be coped with individually and can be coped with only individually.

Such precariousness exposes how members of the polis have to adapt to an ever-changing social landscape, void of the comfort provided by state-verified solutions that can help guide individuals in their daily lives. Instead, liquid modern consumers are expected to formulate personalised strategies of dealing with such contingencies (Bauman, 2006), a point that connects with Anthony Giddens (1991; 1998) work on reflexive modernity, an ideology that celebrates how citizens are encouraged to make choices through deciphering information provided by 'experts' and 'expert' systems. However, while Giddens sees this system as liberating, allowing for the construction of new identities and a renewal of social democracy. On the other hand, Bauman (2000) warns about its perils, namely the levels of insecurity and uncertainty placed onto members of the public through acting in such an individualised manner.

In the field of sport and social policy, synopticism is closely aligned to the workings of new public management, a method of public administration that has sought to create an innovative, hollowed-out state that steers individuals rather than intervening directly in their lives (Green, 2004; Richards and Smith, 2004). This approach is seen in various policy initiatives, from investment in elite sport to hosting mega sporting events like the Olympics (Grix and Carmicheal, 2009). The dynamics expose the workings of synoptic control by creating an environment built around seduction, whereby citizens are encouraged to look to the actions of significant others in the public eye in the hope of using what they see to manage their lives reflexively (Swain, 2019). This approach to public administration shows how governments no longer directly intervene in their subjects lives by institutionalising the polis into sports and physical activity but instead seek to steer their populations by encouraging them to follow the lead of celebrities, in the form of Olympians or sports stars, who demonstrate the benefits of staying physically active and healthy (Green, 2007). Through this system, citizens are encouraged to make their own choices by looking to those in the public eye and using what they see to guide their consumer choices. This focus on

personal consumption exposes how modern forms of governance view citizens as reflexive consumers, able to self-manage their lives through the procurement of information (Eliassen and Sitter, 2008; Swain, 2018).

However, while this system of governance offers an illusion of free choice, it also creates a feeling of 'precarization' (living with contingency), leading to uncertainty in the way members of the polis are encouraged to become risk-taking entrepreneurs. In turn, this feeling fuels a sense of anxiety brought about by the impossible act of trying to ascertain how best to navigate a consumer society built around the procurement of information (Bauman, 2005). This situation leads members of the polis to surrender their freedom and instead seek guidance from significant others, in the form of celebrities, lifestyle guru's or elite athletes, who can offer a solution or word of advice on dealing with such anxieties (Bauman, 2007; Swain, 2017). This increased need for security has led political scientists to link such an environment to the rise of political leaders who imbue a presidential style of leadership based on strength and authority (Montgomery, 2017; Kivitso, 2017). Through this line of thinking, such leaders create an image that attracts those seeking guidance by creating a persona based on values that endear them to their followers. On the political right, this process stirs up vestiges of cultural nationalism and xenophobia, as seen in the rhetoric of populists like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. Both construct a romanticised vision of the past and blame marginalised groups such as the poor and migrants for social unrest, directing 'people's attention away from the uncertainty brought about by policies designed to strip away welfare support that fuels such anxieties (Hadiz and Chrysosgelos, 2017). Similarly, centrist politicians use similar tactics, constructing a 'progressive' but strong image to push neoliberal policy agendas, such as attracting corporate investment or making a case for aligning their country with global trade blocs (Steele and Holomar, 2019).

Importantly for this discussion, such figures, whatever their political persuasion, present themselves as an authoritative voice that communicates a message of certainty, drawing those who seek guidance to their rhetoric (Hadiz and Chrysosgelos, 2017). Such an environment lends itself to explaining why current and ex-professional boxers are now entering mainstream politics. A situation that has seen Vitali Klitschko elected to the post of Mayor of Kiev and Manny Pacquiao, the former pound for pound consensus number one fighter in the sport, appointed to the Senate in his native Philippines (Masaviru, 2016).

These electoral successes connect with the aforementioned discussion on power by explaining how such fighters court a following due to the image of strength, authority and dependability cultivated in the ring and transmitted into the cultural psyche through sports broadcasts, literature, and cinema (Sugden, 1996; Velija, Mierwinski, and Fortune, 2012; Woodward, 2006). As the rest of the paper will demonstrate, such qualities have provided Vitali Klitschko with the political capital needed to position himself as the man backed by the West to implement neoliberal economic reforms in Kiev.

‘The Orange Revolution’: Vitali Klitschko, the political activist

Vitali Klitschko first came to the attention of fight fans at the turn of the century, when he won the WBO² heavyweight title from Englishmen Herbie Hide in London (Mee, 2004). This win heralded Klitschko as a world champion; however, the marginal position of the WBO title in the eyes of many sportswriters in the United States meant that several boxing experts still saw the hard-punching Ukrainian as an up-and-coming contender. In the early 2000s, Klitschko continued his ascent up the heavyweight rankings, culminating in a valiant but losing performance challenging for Lennox Lewis's WBC³, IBO⁴, and Ring Magazine⁵ belts in June 2003. In this fight, Klitschko was ahead on all three of the judge's scorecards when the fight was called to an abrupt halt by the ringside doctor after six rounds due to a massive cut above the 'challenger's left eye (Freeman, 2003). After the bout, Klitschko vigorously called for an immediate rematch, an event that many in the sport felt had the makings of a massive box-office pay per view event. However, Lewis declined the offer and retired in early 2004. After Lewis's retirement, Klitschko faced off against southpaw Corrie Sanders in April 2004 at the Staples Centre in Los Angeles, stopping his South African challenger in the 8th round to win the vacant WBC title (Rafael, 2004).

Klitschko's first defence of the WBC title came in December 2004 against British challenger Danny Williams at the Mandalay Bay Events Centre in Las Vegas. In this fight, Klitschko used the media exposure generated by the event to communicate his political views, proudly voicing his support for political reform in Ukraine by aligning himself with the

² World Boxing Organisation

³ World Boxing Council

⁴ International Boxing Organisation

⁵ Ring Magazine Belt – The consensus champion in a specific weight class according to boxing writers

movement for democratic change, known as 'The Orange Revolution' (Associated Press, 2004). This movement sought to end political corruption in Ukraine by removing Leonid Kuchma, the pro-Kremlin President who had ruled Ukraine for eleven out of the fourteen years since the 'country's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 (Pleines, 2016). To aid this move towards democracy, Klitschko used the Williams bout to highlight the movements cause to viewers in the West, proudly wearing an orange stripe down the back of his shorts and using interviews with western media outlets to state his support for presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko over Leonid 'Kuchma's protégé Viktor Yanukovich (Marone, 2006).

Klitschko's use of the heavyweight title in this manner connects with similar acts of protest undertaken by athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos (Long and Spracklen, 2011). All of whom used the cultural significance of sport and their success to promote ideas of resistance to the broader population. Through this lens, Klitschko used the symbolic status of the heavyweight championship and the enormous amount of media attention it generates to expose injustices in Ukraine and call for closer political alignment with the liberal structures of western democracy. A message that helped to captivate public attention, both amongst Ukrainians taking part in such protests and sympathetic observers in the West, particularly in the United States and Europe, who were exposed to harrowing stories of corruption at the hands of an autocratic regime. In this context, Klitschko had successfully used his public appeal as a world-class athlete to promote a political movement that many people in the western world had little knowledge of before his reign as champion (D'Anieri, 2011). This attention was pivotal in galvanising support for 'The Orange Revolution' both within Ukraine and amongst the broader international community, creating a wave of support that proved instrumental in helping Viktor Yushenko win the 2005 Presidential election (Szostek, 2017).

However, despite this victory, the aftermath of the Presidential elections did not translate into personal political success for Klitschko. He was comprehensively beaten by Leonid Chernovetskyi when running for the Mayor of Kiev in 2006, winning a paltry 26% of the vote. Although Klitschko had campaigned on an anti-corruption ticket and led the countries' Civic Party into the election, many political analysts attributed his disappointing performance to the view that many voters did not yet take him seriously as a politician

(Marone, 2006). This emphasis on a lack of experience was only seen to be amplified when compared to Chernovetskyi, who had the experience of running one of 'Ukraine's most prominent banks Pravex. At this juncture in the early years of Viktor Yushenko's premiership, many Ukrainians were still looking to politicians who had a proven track record of public office, optimising a belief that they could deliver on the hope offered by the country's shift to a western style of democracy (Svyrydenko and Yatsenko, 2018). At this time, Klitschko was seen to lack the experience, statecraft and political backing needed to make a serious run for office.

Paradise lost: Political infighting, economic liberalism, and the fear of freedom

In the aftermath of the 2006 Mayoral elections, Klitschko announced his retirement from boxing, a decision brought about by debilitating back and shoulder injuries sustained in preparation for his December 2005 showdown with top American contender Hasim Rahman. In the immediate aftermath of this announcement, the WBC elevated their former titleholder to the status of Champion Emeritus, granting Klitschko the title of champion in recess and the position of number one challenger (Rafael, 2005). This semi-retirement from boxing left Klitschko free to concentrate on his political career, which had once again gained added significance given the increasingly fractious position of Ukrainian politics in the immediate aftermath of The Orange Revolution. Here, threats had begun to emerge to the new ruling coalition, characterised by internal infighting and the re-emergence of a rejuvenated opposition backed by Moscow.

At the heart of this internal discord was a fallout between President Victor Yushchenko and his newly appointed Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko that had emerged shortly after the two had forged a coalition in 2008. Such division stemmed from Tymoshenko openly voicing criticism of 'Yushenko's economic and social policies. In particular, his policy platform of liberalising the Ukrainian economy by implementing legislation designed to roll back the state's frontiers, reduce public spending in line with IMF⁶ guidelines, and open the economy to foreign direct investment from western corporations (Hale and Orttung, 2016). Here Tymoshenko used Yushenko's remodelling of the economy as ammunition to accuse him of a lack of patriotism, portraying such actions as

⁶ International Monetary Fund

a form of political pandering to the West. While simultaneously claiming that such reforms were undemocratic due to their failure to gain cross-party support, most notably from the Ukrainian Communist Party, who vehemently opposed such policies on ideological grounds. Yushenko's response was to condemn Tymoshenko for fermenting division, a move that he saw as a ploy so that she could replace him as President (Szostek, 2017).

The aftermath of such infighting culminated in a disastrous result for Yushenko at the 2010 Presidential elections, where he lost decisively to his old nemesis opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich. In the aftermath of this defeat, political commentators attributed the loss to Yushenko's weak public image that had served to characterise him as a leader who was unable to command respect within his administration, as well as a perception that he was unpatriotic by selling off public utilities to foreign investors (Hale and Orttung, 2016). Moreover, at a time of significant social and economic change, where members of the public had to adapt to a liberal approach of governance, many felt that their leader was not strong enough to protect their interests and that of their country (Pleines, 2016). This environment highlights Bauman's (2000) ideas on freedom and social control, in how such neoliberal economic policies had left many Ukrainians both fearful and uncertain of how to deal with their newfound liberty. In short, Viktor Yushenko's weak public image had fermented insecurity and uncertainty, leaving the synoptic system of power associated with economic liberalism fractured due to a lack of a robust role model who could alleviate the sense of precariousness that such policies had instigated (Szostek, 2017).

This setback played into Viktor Yanukovich's hands, allowing him to portray Yushenko's leadership as unpatriotic, divided and not strong enough to stand up for ordinary 'Ukrainians at the expense of wealthy multinational corporations. This message and the fear it caused tipped the political pendulum back towards the type of pro-Kremlin policies adopted by Leonid Kuchma in the 1990s and early 2000s. An approach that once again aligned Ukraine geopolitically with Russia and an autocratic form of governance based around a panoptic method of control that sought to suppress freedom of speech, monopolise natural resources in the form of gas and oil, and censor state media. Protests against Yanukovich's regime were brutally suppressed, with supporters of greater integration with western democracies, arrested, imprisoned, or forced into exile (D'Anieri, 2011). The use of such violent acts of political censorship led to the United Nations

classifying Ukraine as one of the most undemocratic countries globally, a ranking shared with theocratic dictatorships such as North Korea and Iran (Svyrydenko and Yatsenko, 2018).

A champion of liberal democracy

Amid the political turmoil within Ukraine, Klitschko made his boxing come back with an eighth-round technical knockout of Samuel Peter in October 2008, reclaiming the WBC title that he had vacated three years earlier (Davies, 2008). This victory saw Vitali join his brother Wladimir as a world champion, starting a reign that would see both brothers' control each of the leading heavyweight title belts for the best part of the next decade. Throughout this time, both Klitschko's used this media attention to highlight the social suffering, economic mismanagement and political corruption occurring in their native Ukraine. Vitali, however, took this political dissent further by making an active move to re-enter the field of politics. In so doing, he began to trade on his image as a tough and dominant champion to establish the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform in 2010, commonly understood through the slogan UDAR, a phrase that translates into Ukrainian as 'punch'. Such terminology sought to position Klitschko as a politician dedicated to fighting corruption and the suppression of free speech (Kyiv Post, 2012).

'UDAR's political ideology aligned with the same rhetoric that formed the central tenants of The Orange Revolution, calling for the implementation of neoliberal policy reforms. These initiatives centred on rolling back government institutions, implementing a balanced state budget to comply with IMF regulations, opening the Ukrainian economy to private enterprise from the West, and reducing Russian interference in the country. Implementing such policies attracted support in the West, particularly in Germany, where Klitschko had resided since starting his professional boxing career in 1996. This support turned into a rather significant international relations coup in November 2011 when UDAR became official partners with German Chancellor Angela 'Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party. A relationship that allowed UDAR to be publicly supported by the German government and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation; an endorsement also came from the Conservative European People's Party (Summerbauer, 2012). According to information obtained by the German political magazine Der Spiegel, the purpose of this alliance was to set Klitschko up as a new strong man in Kiev—to counter growing political influence by the Kremlin. Here, it was hoped that Klitschko could provide strong leadership that would allow

neoliberal economic policies to flourish, enabling German and other western businesses to gain a foothold in an emerging market. Support consisted of logistics and political training in return for policy reforms encouraging foreign direct investment from Germany, Europe, and North America (Spiegel Politik, 2013).

Considering this newfound support, Klitschko established himself as a political alternative to Viktor Yanukovich. In so doing, positioning himself firmly on the side of greater European integration in the long-running debate regarding the future geopolitical alignment of Ukraine. An example of this statesmanship was evident in cultural policy developments such as supporting Ukraine's joint hosting of the UEFA European Football Championships with Poland in 2012. Here, Klitschko threw his weight behind the event by launching an international relations charm offensive that saw him use his sporting celebrity to position Ukraine as a European country, both politically and culturally (Brookes, 2011). To drive home this message, he scheduled a fight with popular Polish heavyweight Thomas Adamek in September 2011, less than a year before the start of the championships. Throughout the build-up to the fight in Wroclaw, Klitschko spoke passionately about the need for Ukraine to adopt the same kind of economic policies as Poland, repeating a systematic message that sought to explain how both Poland and Ukraine had similar-sized economies at the time of independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s (CNN, 2011). However, due to Poland's political alignment with Europe, Poles had now come to enjoy considerable higher living standards than their Ukrainian counterparts (Vollmer, 2016).

Further political posturing was evident in protests aimed at challenging the suppression of free speech in Ukraine. The most prominent being the infamous Euromaidan demonstrations in Kiev during February 2014 (Hale and Orttung, 2016). Here, pro-democracy campaigners used this gathering to call for the reinstation of the 2004 Ukrainian parliamentary constitution, which Viktor Yanukovych had abolished. However, during the protest, Klitschko and other demonstrators were repeatedly tear gassed by anti-riot police, resulting in severe injuries and numerous arrests (Pleines, 2016). The sight of Klitschko bravely standing with other pro-democracy campaigners while being tear gassed served to project an image of strength and unity with others standing up to oppression. In addition to participating in pro-democracy demonstrations, Klitschko also reacted angrily to the Russian

annexe of Crimea in March 2014, calling the invasion a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, and demanding an immediate military counterattack. In addition to being one of the most outspoken voices denouncing the invasion, Klitschko also sought to use the international outcry to position himself as a visible ally of the West. A move that saw him invite former US presidential candidate and leading United Nations pro-democracy diplomat John McCain to Kiev to discuss the situation (Interfax Ukraine, 2014). This image of Klitschko being pictured with one of the United States most prominent foreign envoys helped to not only undermine Viktor Yanukovych but also put forward a vision of statesmanship to those in his country who wanted a strong yet democratically-minded politician committed to the values of economic liberalism and greater integration with the West.

Mayor of Kiev: Synopticism in action

Klitschko's hard work in cultivating his political image led to a visible increase in support in the run-up to the Presidential election in 2014. A point evidenced in polling numbers showing an upsurge in the percentage of votes he would gain in the first round of the election, increasing from 4.8% in December 2011 to 15.1% in February 2013. The publication of a Razumkov poll in October 2013 offered further good news, placing UDAR ('Klitschko's party) on 19.3% of the vote, leading to Klitschko officially entering the Presidential race (Jones, 2014; Polyanska, 2014). However, on the 29th of March 2014, he changed tack, declaring that he would no longer contest the Presidential election but instead shift his attention to the Kiev Mayoral elections scheduled to take place on the 25th of May. In the race for the Presidency, Klitschko endorsed Petro Poroshenko, a prominent businessman, Europhile and fellow pro-democracy campaigner who had previously been chairman of the Ukrainian national bank (Associated Press, 2014). This alliance proved beneficial for Klitschko, who, after receiving Poroshenko's endorsement and support in the race to become Mayor, went on to win the election by securing a staggering 57% of the votes cast. A feat that he would go on to surpass in his re-election in August 2015 by increasing his percentage of the vote to 66.5% (Interfax Ukraine, 2015).

The sheer scale of this election victory gave Klitschko a substantial political mandate to implement the type of policies that he had built his campaign around. Such as rolling back the government, balancing the municipal budget, increasing foreign direct investment into the city, and re-branding Kiev as a cultural hub capable of attracting tourists from across the

globe. This approach started with closing Kiev's infamous black-market economy, a staple of the city since independence from the Soviet Union. The crackdown focussed on shutting illegal 'Kiosk's that had traded out of many of the capitals public parks and moving forward with plans to grow a formalised economy open to taxation that has generated revenue streams to invest in capital infrastructure projects (Depaolo, 2015). This strategy has helped develop the internal infrastructure of Kiev by increasing connectivity both locally within the city and internationally with economic centres in Europe, North America and the Far East. At the centre of this overhaul has been the building of 500km of roads, all to European specifications that have facilitated a greater connection between the cities' central business district, airport, and tourist hubs. The implementation of such projects has sought to deliver on the policy platform of attracting foreign direct investment by connecting Kiev with the global economy (Dickinson, 2020; Graham, 2018).

In addition, Klitschko has also sought to use his sporting celebrity to promote an image of strength, which he has used to deflect allegations of weak leadership and subservience to the West. This tactic has allowed him to avoid the type of attacks that weakened Viktor Yushenko's premiership by employing a synoptic style of leadership that has directed the world's attention onto both the Ukrainian capital and himself as Mayor. Here events such as the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest (Savage, 2016) and the 2018 UEFA Champions League Final, the most-watched television event on the planet (Thorp and McMullin, 2018; Niemann and Brand, 2020), have served to align Kiev culturally with Europe and the West, acting as a promotional tool communicating that the city is open for business and travel. While also allowing Klitschko to cultivate a statesmanlike image on the world stage, projecting his authority by being photographed with foreign leaders such as Angela Merkel and A list celebrities such as Ukrainian football icon Andriy Shevchenko the two-time Brazilian world cup winner Cafu, and world-renowned Reggae artist Sean Paul. This aura of authority projected through acts of statesmanship such as mixing with international celebrities and foreign leaders has served to reinforce Klitschko's image of respect in the eyes of his electorate. The use of such a strategy has been central in helping to avoid criticisms of subservience to the West by showing Kiev and its Mayor in a positive light, gaining respect and recognition amongst the broader international community and allowing

Klitschko to stand on an equal footing, at least aesthetically, with other foreign dignitaries (Kyiv Post, 2018).

This celebrity appeal has also been used domestically to implement policy initiatives within the municipal government. None of which has been more urgent than in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic that has swept the world and Ukraine. Here, the synoptic method of acting as a role model to citizens has allowed Klitschko to guide those living under his jurisdiction to behave sensibly and adhere to social distancing measures implemented to reduce the spread of the virus. In part, the success of Klitschko's administration in this area has centred on the Mayor's message and actions resonating with the public. Examples include routinely wearing a face mask in the public domain and encouraging others to do so in civic addresses that call for people to adhere to social distancing, hand washing and the need to stay at home to prevent the virus from circulating. Political commentators and health experts have praised this approach, commenting how it has played a significant role in reducing the spread of the virus and subsequent deaths in the city by encouraging people to take their health and that of others seriously (Dickinson, 2020; Kyiv Post, 2020). A point amplified by the failures of other political leaders such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro to communicate similar stringent messages, resulting in higher death counts due to their reluctance to encourage mask-wearing due to its perceived feminine image. Here, Klitschko's approach to the virus has won praise by making it acceptable to wear a face mask in public, something that has been central in reducing the spread of the disease, that has led to reduced panic, lower cases, and in making sure Kiev has enough ICU beds to deal with any hospital admissions that do arise (Davies, 2020).

Conclusion

The discussion above has offered an insight into the relationship between sports celebrity, politics, and international relations, through exploring how synoptic power systems connect with neoliberal economics. Here, it has been investigated how the precarity of consumer capitalism leaves members of the polity open to deciphering information from experts and expert systems. In this context, sporting celebrities like Vitali Klitschko, who have entered the political arena, position themselves as role models who, on the one hand, champion the ideology of neoliberalism by implementing policies designed to roll back the state and encourage free enterprise. While simultaneously forging an identity that exudes strength

and certainty, causing citizens to gravitate towards the advice they provide. The use of political power in this manner demonstrates the role of governance and statecraft in neoliberal economies. A perspective that highlights the complex tightrope that politicians like Klitschko are walking through balancing a message that exudes economic liberalism and the need to offer security to members of the polity who experience uncertainty due to the scaling back of the state.

While this paper focuses on the political exploits of Vitali Klitschko, it is vital to state how the role of elite athletes in the political arena is increasing. This statement refers to a shift in former athletes taking on legislative decision-making positions that must not be misconstrued with acts of protest. The relationship between sport and political protest is an area of research in its own right, one that will only grow with the current example of Marcus Rashford and his campaign to hold the UK Government to account over the axing of free school meals for children during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the phenomenon of former elite athletes holding political office and implementing legislative decision making is also increasing. Examples include former AC Milan striker George Weah, President of Liberia since 2018, and Manny Pacquiao, the former undisputed welterweight boxing champion, who was recently elected to the Senate in his native Philippines. These successes highlight this growing phenomenon, which, when analysed through the rubric of synoptic control and the geopolitical spread of western values of economic liberalism, make for fascinating reading. This paper hopes that further insights can be added to this burgeoning area of literature, implementing various theoretical and methodological approaches that will allow a greater understanding of such processes to emerge.

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