

## **Sociological Aspects of the Tokyo Olympics**

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### ***Abstract***

The Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo in July–September 2021 took place in a challenging social environment that seriously affected the public perception of the events. When preparing for the Olympics from 2013–2019, the Japanese people actively supported the Games, which was confirmed by the results of numerous sociological studies. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began, followed by several waves of infection spread. The competition was postponed for a year. Vaccination in Japan was delayed compared with most of the G7 countries. Against this background, in the summer of 2021, the most dangerous Delta strain of coronavirus began to spread in the country, bringing a rise in mortality rates and overcrowding in hospitals in large cities. In this difficult epidemiological and social situation, surveys recorded a negative attitude towards the Olympics.

However, during the competition, the majority opinion once again turned positive, mainly due to the athletic successes of the Japanese team and effective anti-virus control measures. The absence of spectators in the venues, most probably, did not affect the sporting achievements significantly. At least, the Japanese Olympic team won a record number of medals. Infection prevention measures proved effective in limiting the transmission of the virus among the athletes and the Japanese service personnel. The economic and symbolic achievements of the Games did not meet expectations, as, during the Olympics, it was not possible to properly address its significance as the end point of the low-growth “lost decades”, evidence of economic recovery after the triple disaster of 2011, and as a tool to increase Japan’s tourist attractiveness.

Therefore, during the pandemic, major sports events should be held primarily to train top-class athletes and to increase populace satisfaction with the success of the national team rather than to obtain direct economic benefits or improve the host country's image.

**Keywords:** public perception of the Olympic Games, social aspects of sports, Japan, Olympic Games, COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

The Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo, which took place 23 July – 8 August and 24 August – 5 September 2021, were the largest international sports event held during the COVID-19 pandemic. Coronavirus control measures forced the organizers to postpone the Games for a year, hold the major event without spectators, and also seriously limit the number of participants by reducing the lists of official guests and technical staff. These features largely affected the forms of sports competitions and the results that the host country received. This article attempts to summarize relevant sources and analyze some sociological aspects of the Olympic Games (the Paralympics should be an object of special research), focusing on the dynamics of public opinion and the factors that determined it.

The theoretical basis of this work is the concepts of the mechanisms of forming public perception of the Olympic Games [Hiller, Wanner 2018], social aspects of holding major sports events [Dongfeng 2016], principles of organizing epidemiological protection of the Olympians from COVID-19 [Pigozzi, Wolfarth, Cintron, et al. 2021], quantitative assessments of the intangible results of the Olympic Games [Dolan 2019], etc. The information base includes materials from the IOC and the Japanese organizers of the Olympics, scientific articles from the Web of Science, Econlit and EBSCO databases, as well as publications from Japanese and international media. The research method is a comparative analysis of the texts of publications aimed at identifying

the impact of individual phenomena on the dynamics of public perception of the Olympic Games.

The first part of the work following this introduction analyzes public opinion issues and the dynamics of Japanese residents' attitude towards the Olympics. The second part deals with the sports and sociological results of the Games, comparing them with the previous competitions. The third part provides an analysis of the measures to combat the COVID-19 spread among the athletes and discusses criteria for evaluating their effectiveness. The final part of the article touches upon the symbolic significance of the Games for completing the "lost decades", recovery after the tsunami, the earthquake, and the nuclear accident of 2011, and for increasing the tourist attractiveness of the country. On this basis, the author summarizes the motives for holding major sporting events in the pandemic era.

### **Dynamics of Public Opinion in Japan Regarding the Olympics**

Public opinion has recently begun to be systematically taken into account in the context of the Olympic movement. This is probably due to the spread of critical ideas about the nature of modern Olympics, which are allegedly far removed from the desires of the broad masses of the people, with elite athletes participating in competitions and a narrow circle of local leaders organizing the games under the patronage of the elite Olympic Committee [Lensky 2008]. As a response to such criticism, there appeared a noticeable increase in the use of local referenda in nominating candidate cities for the Olympic Games in the early 2010s. This makes it obvious that, in democratic countries, the factor of public opinion plays an increasing role in making decisions about hosting Olympic Games [Hiller, Wanner 2018].

It should be noted that surveying the people's will may result in highly unexpected consequences. This was graphically demonstrated by the events of 2013–2014 around the competition for the right to host the

2022 Winter Games. During the competitive selection, Munich, Davos, Krakow, and Oslo successively withdrew their applications due to the opposition of the people, and only Beijing and Almaty remained among the applicants, as they did not hold popular votes. The choice of the venue for the next Olympic Games gives a start to a long period of preparation. It lasts 7–8 years and is associated with significant expenditure of effort and resources on design and construction of large facilities, which means that it brings along a number of related inconveniences and potentially conflicting organizational and political decisions. It is not surprising that modern Olympic Games are often accompanied by the appearance of local opposition, which asserts itself at all stages of the Games' preparation and hosting [Hiller, Wanner 2018].

The existence of different, often diametrically opposed points of view on the importance of the Olympics and other major sporting events emphasizes the need to coordinate interests and study public opinion. Unfortunately, research in this area is based on disparate methods, and the conclusions are fragmentary. Nevertheless, even a simple enumeration of some of the results of the previous studies may be of interest for comparison with the processes taking place in Japan.

In particular, among the reasons for the approval of the competition by local residents, there are numerous diverse points, varying from the long-term positive impact on infrastructure development to the expansion of tourism and improvement of the environment [Rocha, Barbanti, Chelladurai 2017]. At the same time, the decision to support the Olympics is more influenced by social expectations (a sense of national unity, the possibility of increasing national prestige, the development of sports culture, etc.) than the possibility of obtaining economic benefits (additional tax revenues, transparent income distribution, long-term economic incentives) [Streicher, Schmidt, Schreye, Torgler 2017].

As a rule, the perception of events changes over time, with the positive side strengthening and the negative one weakening [Ribeiro, Correia, Biscaia 2020]. Consequently, focusing on the positive results of sports events may have a stronger public response than minimizing possible negative consequences [Muller 2012]. Positive perception is enhanced

if residents are involved in the preparation and holding of events, and do not simply buy tickets and attend as spectators [Hiller, Wanner 2018]. The attitude to competitions depends even on the geography of residence: respondents from areas with a large concentration of sports facilities suffer more from transport and other restrictions and are more critical about competitions [Weimar, Rocha 2019].

Turning to the analysis of public opinion regarding Tokyo 2020, we note that there was no referendum on the nomination of the city as a candidate for hosting the Olympic Games. But surveys of the Japanese people by arbitrary methods in May 2012 – October 2013 were carried out in parallel by the international and national Olympic Committees, as well as by a number of popular Japanese newspapers. The most representative survey of 400 residents in October 2012 showed an approval of the Olympics by 67 percent of the respondents, with 13 percent against and 21 percent undecided. In 2013, public support gradually increased, and the share of those in favor of holding the games in some cases reached 83 percent. In September 2013, Tokyo was officially declared the city of the 2020 Olympics.

During the preparation period, the number of public opinion polls was drastically reduced. A pleasant surprise was a survey by a private institute, MRI (Mitsubishi Research Institute), on Olympic legacy, which was conducted in six rounds according to a single methodology among 3500 people in 2013–2019. According to the MRI data, the average share of respondents who mentioned interest in hosting the Games was 56 percent, with two peaks in the dynamics of this indicator: 65.9 percent in 2013 and 64.2 percent in 2018. In 2019, 45 percent of the respondents had an idea about the “Olympic legacy”, but in 2015–2016, this term was known only to 20–21 percent. A steep rise to 45–48 percent occurred in 2017, and after that the results remained largely stable. On average, 33 percent of the respondents expressed hope for changes in Japanese society under the influence of the Olympics, although in the first year of the survey this rose to 51 percent. The main areas of the desired changes were related, in descending order, to the concepts of “society of safety and calm”,

“revitalization of the regions”, “effective use of Olympic facilities”, “health”, and “economic growth”. This sequence did not change significantly over the years of the surveys.

The most detailed description of public opinion regarding the Tokyo Olympics was to be a study by the public Japanese broadcasting Corporation NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai). The surveys were conducted in five rounds in 2015–2019 by the method of mailing questionnaires; out of the 3,500 reached, about 2,500 people (approximately 67 percent) sent answers. The questionnaires included 48 substantive questions to clarify the degree of approval of the Olympics, the level of interest, expectations from hosting the Games, anxiety factors, attitude to changes in the city during the preparation period, ideas about the future use of Olympic facilities, and specific aspects of media coverage of the Games.

The results showed that, in 2015–2019, the share of those approving of hosting the Games was almost stable and remained at the level of 80 percent for the Olympic and 60 percent for the Paralympic Games. The list of expectations from upcoming events did not change either (“contribution to economic development”, “revitalization of regions”, “expansion of international exchanges”, etc.). The same applies to the list of concerns (“terrorism”, “complication of the transport situation”, “deterioration of public safety” in Tokyo). The greatest changes occurred in the assessment of the city’s readiness to host the competition: 80 percent of those worried were replaced by 70 percent of the respondents confident in good preparation. At the same time, the share of those who feared the consequences of receiving a large number of foreign tourists increased from 30 to 45 percent, but the percentage of those concerned about large expenses dropped from 77 to 43 percent.

A positive attitude towards the Olympics was also expressed by 85 percent of the respondents during a one-time survey of the Japanese government in December 2019. Similar results (73 percent support) were obtained in January 2020 by NHK analysts, who included a question about interest in the Games in a monthly telephone survey on trust in the government. Despite the difference in methods and

difficulties in comparing the results, based on the data provided, it is possible to confidently declare that the overwhelming majority of the Japanese population during the preparation period from 2013 to early 2020 supported the Olympic Games. However, the coronavirus pandemic and related events dramatically changed the situation.

In March 2020, the Tokyo Olympics were postponed for a year. The previous public opinion studies were no longer relevant, and the above-mentioned periodic reviews by MRI and NHK were discontinued. In the analysis of residents' attitude to the postponed games, there emerged a gap of about 9 months. The Olympics issue was raised again only in October 2020 as part of the above-mentioned monthly NHK survey on trust in the government. Then, 40 percent of the respondents agreed that the Games should be held, 23 percent opposed the idea, and 25 percent supported a new postponement.

Between December 2020 and September 2021, questions about attitudes to the Olympics in various formulations regularly appeared in NHK surveys. In December 2020 and January 2021, 27 and 16 percent of respondents were in favor of holding the Games, while 32 and 38 percent opposed the idea. In February, March, April, and May 2021, the level of support was 52, 58, 61, and 44 percent, while 38, 33, 32, and 49 percent of respondents were against, respectively. Consequently, the share of those opposing the Olympics exceeded the percentage of those approving of the Games in December – January and May 2021. It should be noted that it was during these months that Japan experienced periodic spikes in the number of people infected with coronavirus.

In order to combat the spread of the infection in March, it was announced that foreign tourists would not be allowed into the country, and in July a decision was made to hold the main Olympic events without spectators. In such a situation in June – July 2021, 25 and 31 percent of the respondents positively perceived the organizers' explanations about the fact and form of holding the Olympics, while 65 percent and 69 percent expressed a negative attitude. In July, 38 percent supported anti-infection measures, while 57 percent were opposed to them. These data allow us to conclude that shortly before the Games,

the majority of the respondents opposed their holding, but since the decision had been made and was already being implemented, their protest was expressed by a negative attitude towards the organizers and the anti-infection measures taken. Apparently, the sponsor companies were also skeptical, although no corporate surveys were conducted on the eve of the Olympics. However, it is known that the heads of the largest companies such as Toyota, Panasonic, Fujitsu, NTT, Asahi, and Sumitomo Chemicals refused to participate in the opening ceremony of the Games. During the competitions, advertisements by these companies did not appear in the media. A negative attitude towards the Olympics was formed in a number of countries. According to an international Internet survey by Ipsos in July 2021, on average, 43 percent of 19,510 residents of 28 states agreed with holding the Games during the pandemic, while the remaining 57 percent gave negative answers. Supporters of the Olympics were in the majority in only 7 countries, whereas negative opinions prevailed in 21 countries. The lowest level of support was observed in Korea (14 percent), Japan (27 percent), and Argentina (31 percent). Residents of Turkey (71 percent), Saudi Arabia (66 percent), and Russia (61 percent) voted most actively for holding the Games.

After the Games, the situation changed, primarily in Japan. The NHK survey of August 10, 2021 recorded a positive assessment of the event in 62 percent of the responses, and a negative one in 34 percent. The change in public opinion after the Games was also recorded by other polls. According to the *Yomiuri Shimbun* dated August 9, 2021, 64 percent of the respondents positively assessed the Games, while 28 percent responded negatively. On August 7–8, TBS/JNN reported 61 percent positive assessments of the Games. In the survey by JIJI.com on August 13, positive and negative assessments accounted for 38.0 and 35.5 percent respectively. The results of a survey in the corporate sector on August 19 also showed that the vast majority supported the holding of the Olympics post-factum.

Apparently, these data quite reliably confirm the fact of a positive assessment of the Olympic Games after their completion by the residents of Japan and the sponsoring companies. It turns out that

the negative attitude to the upcoming events prevailing in July changed to the opposite in less than a month. As noted above, similar metamorphoses had already been observed at the previous Olympics. However, the Tokyo 2020 events were held in the unique conditions of the pandemic. An analysis of relevant publications in the Japanese media allows us to conclude that the change in public opinion could have been brought about by the success of Japanese athletes and effective anti-virus measures. Let us try to understand the mechanism of influence of these factors on the perception of the Olympics.

### **Sporting and Sociological Results of the Tokyo 2020 (2021) Olympics**

The sporting results of the Games merit the highest assessment [Belov 2021b]. This is evidenced by the large number of participants from many countries, the wide list of sports represented, impressive results and numerous world and Olympic records. Competitions were held in 33 sports, with 339 events held and about 5000 medals awarded. Taking part in the competitions were 205 teams of national Olympic Committees, as well as the IOC Olympic team consisting of refugees and apatrides, a total of 11,483 athletes. 49 percent of the participants in the Games were women, which made Tokyo 2020 the most gender-balanced Olympics. The Games brought about 17 world records and 24 Olympic ones. Georgian weightlifter Lasha Talakhadze set three world records, US swimmer Caeleb Dressel won five gold medals, and Australian swimmer Emma McKeon received seven medals of various denominations. The expansion of the range of Olympic sports made it possible to attract new athletes to the competition, among whom both very young and more experienced participants were able to prove themselves. As a result, the Tokyo 2020 Games became more inclusive in terms of the age of the athletes. The youngest gold medalist at the Games was the 13-year-old Japanese skateboarder Momiji Nishiya, and the oldest was the 52-year-old rider Jessica von Bredow-Werndl from Germany. The silver medal in skateboarding was awarded to

the 12-year-old athlete Kokona Hiraki from Japan, the 62-year-old rider Andrew Hoy from Australia received the same medal in dressage.

An interesting sociological feature of Tokyo 2020 was an expanded diversity of participants and their forms of behavior. Among the female weightlifters, there was for the first time ever a transgender athlete who had undergone a sex change. During the Games, the issues of sexual orientation of athletes were widely discussed from the standpoint of correctness and tolerance. For the first time, political gestures on the part of participants became possible during competitions and awarding ceremonies. Accordingly, signs of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and protests against violations of the rights of the Muslim population in China attracted a lot of attention. Diversity, equality, and inclusion of a wide range of participants, regardless of peculiarities of their social behavior, can be considered an important trend that significantly intensified during the Olympics.

The vast majority of Tokyo 2020 competitions were held without spectators in the stands. However, the impact of the absence of fans on sports results is difficult to determine, since previous studies contain contradictory conclusions about their correlation. In particular, the majority of basketball players from US college teams noted that the presence of spectators improved their commitment, and this happened regardless of the audience's attitude – positive or negative in relation to a particular team [Blum, Davis 2002]. A statistical study of the results of football matches during the European Championship 2020 did not reveal a significant impact of empty stands [Wunderlich, Weigelt, Rein, Memmert 2021]. But for biathlonists, a very complex reaction was characteristic, depending on gender and the nature of tasks performed, namely, in the presence of spectators, men ran better (a task related to physical fitness), but shot worse (a task requiring concentration), but women showed exactly the opposite results [Heinrich, Müller, Stoll, Cañal-Bruland 2021]. As a result, in the complete absence of special studies on the impact of empty stands on the sporting achievements of Tokyo 2020, perhaps only one thing can be said: it is currently impossible to establish the exact influence of these factors.

Japanese athletes won 58 medals, including 27 gold, 14 silver, and 17 bronze ones. In terms of performance, the last Olympics were the most productive for the Japanese team in the entire history of their participation in the Olympic movement. In total, during the twenty-two Summer Olympic Games since 1912, Japan has won 439 awards, including 41 medals (12 gold ones) at the competitions in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

There is nothing unexpected in the record-breaking results of the Tokyo 2020 games. Scientific research shows that the number of Olympic medals received by a particular national team statistically depends on the population of the country and the size of per capita income [Hon-Kwong, Wing 2008]. Both factors speak in favor of Japan. In addition, the host country of the Olympics, as a rule, presents a larger number of athletes; they do not need acclimatization after a long journey; they are more familiar with local conditions and sports facilities; and, they are more actively supported by fans. As a result, the members of the host country's national team always win more medals than when performing away from home [Hosein, Khadan, Paul 2013]. Finally, the host country may propose a number of new sports for inclusion in the Olympic programme. This is how softball, karate, skateboarding, sport climbing, and surfing, which are extremely popular in Japan, appeared in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic schedule. In four of the five mentioned sports, the Japanese athletes proved to be the best in the world. As a result, the Japanese Olympians in Tokyo 2020 took third place in the "gold" rankings, fifth place in the overall medal rankings, and received a lot of enthusiastic appraisals.

### **Antivirus Protection at Tokyo 2020 Competitions**

Holding the Olympic Games in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the organizers to take strict precautionary measures, such as restricting the entry of tourists and coaches from abroad, holding competitions without spectators in Tokyo and adjacent prefectures,

as well as isolating the athletes in the “bubbles” of safety. The small number of registered disease cases among persons associated with the Olympics (about 400 for the entire period July 23 – August 8, and mainly among the Japanese service personnel), as well as no cases of transmission of the virus from athletes to each other and Japanese volunteers confirmed the effectiveness of these restrictions. The measures taken in Tokyo were developed while taking into account the experience of the USA gained in 2020–2021 during international golf and tennis competitions. They differed significantly from the methods of European countries that also held major sporting events. For example, the European Football Championship ended on July 11, 2021. More than 60,000 people gathered at the final match at Wembley Stadium in London, cheering for their favorite teams without any signs of restraining emotions or observing social distances. And as early as on July 23, the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games was held in Tokyo, where the situation looked completely different: no tourists, empty stands, and preliminary quarantine for the athletes. The differences become clear when one considers that, at that time in Japan, there was a surge of morbidity with the Delta strain of coronavirus, and the percentage of vaccinated residents was about twice as low as in the UK. In addition, since the beginning of the pandemic, the most important element of Japan’s anti-virus policy had been the actual closure of borders to reduce infection through international exchange channels [Belov 2021a; Belov, Tikhotskaya 2020]. It is not surprising that the same measures were extended to the period of the Olympic Games.

First of all, entry into the country was allowed only for athletes, a minimum number of coaches, massage therapists and technical workers, journalists, officials and members of the IOC. Out of 180,000 prospective guests, only about 70,000 people showed up in Tokyo. Foreign tourists numbered 51.2 thousand instead of the anticipated one million. The task of preventing carriers of new strains of the virus from entering the country was largely solved with the help of entry restrictions.

The main measure of anti-virus protection was making “bubbles” of safety around athletes, i.e., their actual isolation from contact with members of other teams and with the local population. At the airport of arrival, athletes were separated; after passing the tests, the groups were sent in separate buses to the places of two-week quarantine and then moved to the Olympic village. During the quarantine period, the athletes could stay either in a hotel or in a training room. Walks and contacts with local residents were completely excluded. Only translators and service personnel communicated with the athletes. These people lived at home, i.e., they went beyond the “bubbles,” but they were tested for coronavirus every day and had to inform doctors about any changes in their state of health. Similarly strict measures were taken both in the Olympic village and during the competitions. Testing for coronavirus was carried out daily. Athletes were required to arrive in Japan in compliance with all anti-infection requirements at least five days before the competitions and leave the country within 48 hours after their completion.

As mentioned above, from the medical point of view, the listed measures proved to be effective and successful. However, minimal human contacts, apparently, had certain social consequences. At least, US gymnast Simone Biles, who stopped performing because of her poor psychological condition, told correspondents that she lacked communication with her friends and fans under strict restrictions during competitions in Tokyo. Real-life communication largely determines the morale of many athletes, which must be taken into account when preparing and conducting any competitions during a pandemic. Apparently, this thesis was confirmed during the Winter Olympics in Beijing in 2022, where even stricter preventive measures were taken, based on the Chinese policy of zero tolerance for the spread of the coronavirus.

## Conclusion

Among the motives for holding the 2020 Tokyo Games, in addition to those listed above, there were also economic and “symbolic” aspects. Expectations of economic results were associated with obtaining long-term effects from investments and one-time incomes from the sale of rights to broadcast events, tickets to competitions, related goods, etc. The investment programs of preparation for the Olympics were reduced by cutting down the associated investment in infrastructure development. At the same time, the postponement of the games, anti-infective measures, and unforeseen expenses led to an increase in costs. Among the estimates of the total cost of the Olympics circulating in the press, the sum of \$15.4 billion is most often mentioned. The amount of income received is still unknown, which means that it is impossible to sum up the overall economic balance. Nevertheless, taking into account the experience of the previous games, we can confidently say that the economic benefits of holding the Tokyo 2020 are small at best. However, according to the *Mainichi* newspaper, the possible losses are also insignificant, especially in comparison with Japan’s GDP that exceeds five trillion dollars.

It is no less difficult to sum up the “symbolic” results of the Olympics. During the contest for the right to host the Games and during their preparation, the organizers believed that the upcoming events would put an end to the long period of low growth rates (“lost decades”), enhance Japan’s tourist attractiveness and, most importantly, demonstrate the country’s success in restoring the territories affected by the earthquake, tsunami, and the nuclear accident of 2011. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic led to an economic decline, the de facto closure of borders for tourists and the cancellation of most public events in Fukushima Prefecture and the surrounding areas. And yet, if we ignore the “symbolic” moments listed above, the overall assessment of the Olympics proved to be high, which was confirmed in the speeches by the IOC President and representatives of China, which hosted the Olympic Games in the winter of 2022.

This allows us to draw an important conclusion about the motivation to hold major sporting events in the context of the pandemic and related restrictions. The Tokyo 2020 experience shows that economic benefits and symbolic effects are hardly achievable in the emerging environment of the “new normality”. But the development of mass sports through training top-class athletes, the satisfaction of a country’s residents from the success of their national team and the prevention of infection among athletes look quite realistic and can be a key argument in favor of hosting future games.

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