

# Paris Olympics: yes to the sport, no to the IOC

Sunday 28 July 2024, by [ROUGET Antton](#) (Date first published: 27 July 2024).

**In order to host the 2024 Olympic Games, which were officially opened in Paris on Friday evening, the public authorities in France caved in to the demands of the International Olympic Committee. Yet, argues Mediapart's Antton Rouget in this op-ed article, the IOC is a clannish organisation that imposes its model and enriches itself without ever being accountable to anyone.**

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"Is the IOC a mafia?" This cutting question was once [posed by France Inter radio station](#). The response was equally scathing. "Yes," according to a vast majority of the public broadcaster's listeners. This was in July 2008, on the eve of the Beijing Games, when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had just managed, through the power of money alone, to crush all protests and calls for a boycott so that its business model could continue to thrive.

Four Olympiads later, the world's most powerful sports organisation has now rolled up in Paris. And with the head of the "mafia" - according to France Inter listeners - Thomas Bach, present in all his majesty for the opening ceremony on the River Seine on Friday. It is Bach - who was "only" the IOC number 2 in Beijing in 2008 - who will preside over these Olympic and Paralympic Games; and not the representatives of France's public authorities, who have been reduced to the rank of mere underlings and financiers.

For although we tend to forget this - thanks to the considerable resources committed by the public authorities and the huge level of coercion imposed on the population by this event - the Paris Olympic Games are a private event, whose primary objective is to enrich a company with a clannish, opaque, and inequitable operating model.

*Having just been lit by French Olympians Marie-José Pérec and Teddy Riner, the Olympic cauldron soars into the Paris sky at the culmination of the opening ceremony on July 26<sup>th</sup> 2024. © Photo Mohd Rasfan / AFP*

This organisation, the International Olympic Committee, which signed the host city contract and then delegated operations to the Paris 2024 organising committee, has been a private Swiss association since 1984. Its stated ambition, engraved in its Olympic Charter, is to "build a better world through sport". However, its methods and results are more akin to those of an entertainment

multinational than the “non-profit organisation” it claims to be. Based in Lausanne, like nearly forty other international sports federations, the IOC benefits from tax exemptions and is under no obligation to publish detailed accounts.

In general terms we know that during the period of 2013-2016 it pocketed €5.7 billion in revenues (mainly from sponsors and broadcasters); and €7.6 billion for the next period from 2017-2021. According to its press office “90%” of this sum is reinvested in the Olympic movement, which the IOC says it heads with the aim of funding sports projects worldwide.

But no information allows us to track the distribution of this money with precision. At the IOC, everything is opaque: contracts, flows of money, decisions. Even the archives are [not always accessible to historians](#). We can just about glean, from reading the organisation’s activity reports, that its president Thomas Bach, although officially a “volunteer,” received an “allowance” of 275,000 euros in 2023. This information appears in very small print at the end of the last public document, [released on July 23<sup>rd</sup>](#), on the occasion of the 142<sup>nd</sup> IOC session in Paris.

All other “volunteer” members of the organisation (111 in total), as well as the honorary members (38), receive “administrative support” of 7,000 dollars per year. Additionally, they are granted a “daily indemnity” of 450 dollars for any event or meeting participation (double for commission chairs).

For the Games, this allowance is also paid for the day before and the day after the competition to cover travel time. According to this rule, each IOC member present in Paris for the Olympic Games (17 days + 2 for travel) and then the Paralympic Games (12 days + 2) will receive at least 14,850 dollars over the period. Officials also get their transport and accommodation covered (the IOC has set up camp in a [luxurious hotel](#) behind the Champs-Élysées) and access to events. Not to mention the receptions. On Thursday, July 25<sup>th</sup>, the eve of the opening ceremony, these officials were invited to a [prestigious gala dinner](#), created by multi-Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse (a [friend of Emmanuel Macron](#)) in the heart of the Louvre museum.

This treatment contrasts sharply with the situation faced by most Olympic athletes, the true protagonists of the event. Even for the wealthiest countries, such as France, some athletes have been forced to organise online fundraising to cover their expenses.

“Broadcast and sponsorship deals for the Summer and Winter Games deliver billions to the IOC and its affiliates every year. But by the time that flood of cash flows through the Movement and reaches the athletes, barely a trickle remains, often a few thousand dollars at most,” wrote journalist Will Hobson in an investigation into the situation of American athletes, including the best in their discipline, published in [The Washington Post](#) in July 2016, on the eve of the Rio Olympic Games. Nothing has really changed since then, reinforcing the image described by Will Hobson of a “multibillion-dollar entertainment industry whose entertainers are, in this country, often expected to raise their own income or live in poverty”.

In Paris, this industry will also benefit from the (entirely voluntary) participation of 45,000 volunteers deployed at the competitions, who do not even receive assistance for accommodation. They include teenager, Gabin, 18, who was forced to organise a [Leetchi](#) online fundraising campaign to pay for his trip from Pas-de-Calais in the north of France, as reported by the newspaper [L’Avenir de l’Artois](#). As if that wasn’t enough, costs are further kept down thanks to the risky conditions for [site installation workers](#) and for the [dancers at the opening ceremony](#).

## **Repeated scandals**

Contrary to popular belief, the working of the IOC does not rely on the membership of states or international organisations. It is an autonomous, supranational entity made up of individuals recruited by co-option and accountable to no one.

The Olympic Charter even specifies, in [article 16](#), that its members are not “liable for the debts or obligations of the IOC”. Votes are conducted by secret ballot, including the most sensitive ones that lead to the selection of host countries for competitions and which are regularly tainted by corruption scandals. This long tradition of scandals ranges from the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Games (the city in Utah has nevertheless just been selected for another round in 2034) to the last Summer Games in Tokyo in 2021.

In the latter case, the [French justice system](#) established that Senegalese official Lamine Diack coordinated the vote of African IOC members so that the Japanese bid would win, while an offshore company linked to his son received \$2.3 million in hidden commission from the Japanese bid committee. The [same channels](#) had already been used for the 2016 Rio bid and for Russian athletes to avoid sanctions after the implementation of a [state-sponsored doping system](#).

## **A close associate of Modi, a supporter of Milei**

Among the current 111 committee members, there is a diverse group of former athletes and federation representatives who operate at the meeting point between business and politics: Prince Albert II of Monaco, Indian art collector Nita Ambani (wife of an Indian billionaire close to prime minister Narendra Modi), Finnish minister of agriculture and former athletics champion Sari Essayah, and former Algerian MP Mustapha Berraf. The latter has long been a prominent figure in the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa (ANOCA, funded by the IOC), which left behind debts - still unpaid - of several hundred thousand euros owed to a French entrepreneur after the London 2012 Olympic Games.

The IOC is also a platform for Argentine banker Gerardo Werthein, who has been on the executive board - the inner sanctum of the organisation - since 2020. He is a close associate of far-right president [Javier Milei](#), who recently appointed him as ambassador to the United States, without this prompting any reaction in Lausanne.

Officially “apolitical”, the organisation also remained silent when another of its members, former French champion hurdler and minister Guy Drut - convicted in 2005 in a rigged market affair, before being pardoned by Jacques Chirac - [called for people to vote for the far-right](#) in the recent parliamentary elections in France. No one objected, either, to the past of Juan Antonio Samaranch, ex-minister of sports under Spanish dictator General Franco, who retained his title of “honorary president” despite the unearthing in 2009 of a photo of him making a fascist salute in 1974.

In office from 1981 to 2000 (and re-elected by acclamation each time), Samaranch shifted the IOC into a new finance-focused era, while he also ran an empire (textile, banking, and real estate) in Spain and South America. Co-opted in 2002, his son and heir, Juan Antonio Samaranch Jr., is now vice-president of the IOC.

## **The making of a monopoly**

The years under Samaranch Sr. marked a turning point in the committee's organisation, which saw the Olympic trademarks registered in 1985, paving the way for an explosion in revenue. "Around \$30,000 was paid by TV channels to the IOC in the 1970s. Today, it amounts to several billion," sports historian Patrick Clastres pointed out back in 2008.

Meanwhile researcher Alexandre Morteau [noted in a recent thesis on the subject](#) that "Olympic leaders embarked on a process of centralisation and bureaucratisation of the system to build and manage their monopoly of revenue redistribution". This has subsequently allowed these same leaders, associated with dominant economic actors in the sector, to increase their influence in order to "negotiate tax exemptions with public authorities".

In the top-down and clientelist system over which the IOC presides, the organisation is not simply a follower of changes in society. With its power, it has become a driving force, shaping the event the way it wants and spreading an ideology whose most striking manifestations have emerged on the streets of Paris in recent weeks.

The privatisation of public space by international sponsors (Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Samsung) or national ones ([LVMH](#), Accor, Carrefour) that we have seen is part of the the IOC's playbook. The algorithmic surveillance and other aspects of intense security, which as [The Guardian](#) has noted have led to the militarisation of central Paris on a scale not seen since World War II, were introduced at the IOC's demand. As for the "ancillary" costs that skyrocket (especially for security) after being underestimated in the original bid document - well, that is what always happens with the IOC.

In April, a senior official from France's Ministry of the Interior expressed concerns to Mediapart about the Games organisers' ever-increasing demands, which the state could no longer keep up with, particularly when it came to implementing security measures. These demands included the number of firefighters being deployed, at a time of a risk of fires elsewhere in the country. On Thursday, July 25<sup>th</sup>, a sports representative voiced outrage over the inequalities caused by the Games after he received, along with his invitation to the opening ceremony, a free and unlimited 'Navigo' transport pass until August 14<sup>th</sup> while public transport prices for passengers in the Paris region have doubled.

## **The confrontation that never was**

Yet the public authorities cannot claim to be victims of the IOC's whims, having bent over backwards to accommodate them. As early as 2015, at the time of the first signs of a Paris bid, a few senior officials were warning about the need to make the project conditional on having frank negotiations with the committee. Their motto could be summarised as: "OK for the Olympics, but not in this format." They criticised the financial and environmental impact of the plans. And when other bids withdrew in the face of Paris, and with Los Angeles preferring to take more time to prepare for 2028, it seemed to provide an even better opportunity to have such negotiations in 2016.

But this avenue was never seriously explored. The [small team](#) behind the bid - [undermined](#) by conflicts of interest and with some members also linked to the IOC (starting with Paris organising committee president Tony Estanguet, a member of the organisation until 2021) - chose instead to forge ahead to keep the existing system going. Yes, it was a system on its last legs, but it was one in which everyone was perfectly at home. "The Games are a dream. But we only look at the dream, we

forget to look behind the dream, at the dream machine behind it, which is not very shiny,” noted former Senegalese athlete Lamine Gueye in 2008, author of a book about his years of [fighting alone against the Samaranch presidency](#).

This blindness was then confirmed at every stage of the project, from the fine-tuning of the bid application to the passing of the ‘[Olympic law](#)’ that rolled out the red carpet for the dictates of the Lausanne institution. So much so that, years later, in a [report](#) published in January 2023, France’s Court of Auditors was still urging the Paris 2024 organising committee and the state – reminding the latter that it was the “ultimate [*financial*] guarantor in the event of a final deficit” – to toughen their stance in a “coordinated and firm manner” to try to secure “modifications” from the IOC.

This warning was far too late, and so ineffective that the French regions of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur were, with the backing of Emmanuel Macron, officially selected by the IOC on July 24<sup>th</sup> to [host the Winter Olympics in 2030](#), in [mountains already under stress](#) from climate change.

**Antton Rouget**

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**P.S.**

- Mediapart. 27 July 2024 à 12h36:  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/270724/paris-olympics-yes-sport-no-ioc>

The French version of the original op-ed can be found [here](#)

*English version by Michael Streeter*