

## The Politics of Sports Mega-Events in Russia KAZAN, SOCHI, AND BEYOND

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One of the most visible aspects of Russia's path to globalization is the country's hosting of large international sporting events. In July 2013, Kazan hosted the World Student Games (the Universiade). In February 2014, Sochi will host the Winter Olympics. A dozen Russian cities are preparing for the 2018 World Cup. We can add to the list the 2016 Ice Hockey World Championship in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as a Formula One race, World Aquatics Championship, and other tournaments.

All these global mega-events may be seen as islands of "glocalization," a product of an expanding international market for promoting regional and urban brands and Russia's search for greater legitimation of its international standing. The ways in which these high-profile championships are discussed extend far beyond sport to include an array of social and political issues. Most of these come down to the Kremlin's (mis-)management of huge international fora and their effects on different sectors of the economy, society, and administrative apparatus.

In this memo, I analyze the experience of hosting and preparing for sports mega-events to illuminate certain mechanisms of power and sources of ideological indoctrination in today's Russia. I focus on lessons from the recent Universiade in Kazan and on the forthcoming Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.

### **The Machine of Mega-Events: From Kazan to Sochi**

The Universiade in Kazan was an event more noticeable inside Russia than abroad, despite the presence over the course of ten days of almost 12,000 athletes from 160 countries competing in 27 sports, as well as 150,000 visitors. Its domestic significance was boosted by two consecutive visits (including for the Universiade's opening ceremony) of President Vladimir Putin, who remarked that the Universiade ought to be considered a testing ground for other upcoming sports mega-events in Russia. Yet those events themselves appear to be a litmus test for the ability of Putin's regime to successfully host global events. In this regard, the Universiade unveiled a number of

important characteristics of power relations within Russia and raised a plethora of questions related to the Kremlin's strategy toward mega-events, as well as their political and social effects.

### **Putin's Sporting Ideology**

Mega-events are a double-edged sword for the Kremlin. On the one hand, they are the means for a mass-scale redistribution of financial resources and, indirectly, the competences and prerogatives of different groups of powerholders. The Kremlin wishes to strengthen its security-making capacities and role as the center of political decision-making by its effective management of high-profile international events. Engaging and disciplining regions like Tatarstan—with a record of skeptical attitudes toward Moscow's rule—is another political function of these projects.

At the same time, such events are playgrounds for ideological articulations of the Kremlin's hegemonic discourse. The Sochi Olympics are an essential part of Russia's triumphalist narrative of "rising from its knees," retrieving its great power status, and returning to the "premier league" of world politics. As presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov acknowledged, Russia is eager to exhibit its capacity to run sizeable international projects while the EU is mired in financial crisis. The entertainment aspect is essential for boosting feelings of national pride through sport: for example, French movie star Gerard Depardieu, who was recently granted Russian citizenship, plays a Russian sports manager in the lavishly state-sponsored film *Sports Without Borders*, set to be released right before the Olympics.

On the one hand, there is some evidence that the Universiade was intended to communicate the ideology of Putin's regime via messages intentionally formulated in non-political language. By forbidding volunteers in Kazan to talk politics with foreigners, or by proposing to participants of the closing ceremony to kiss each other as a celebratory gesture of love and peace, Universiade organizers wished not only to stage a politically sterile event but also to demonstrate that sports can connect people more effectively than diplomacy and foreign policymaking. Yet on the other hand, lying behind this putative universalism was a determination to attain an impressive national triumph, which is a clearly political move. The Russian team had an unusual number of world-class athletes at the Universiade and won as many medals as all the other teams combined, which questioned the spirit of competitiveness. Instead, the Universiade turned into an orchestration of public performance, aimed at boosting patriotic feelings of pride and glorification of "the Russian spirit."

But this superiority provoked serious skepticism among observers, who deemed that the Universiade was an expensive spectacle staged for easy victories that could be widely publicized as a symbolic vindication of Russia's grandeur. President Putin took such criticism personally, recommending that skeptics "take Viagra," a comment that revealed the degree of the Kremlin's irritation—and serious communication problems—with its opponents.

In Sochi, Olympic organizers will most likely face a series of even sharper information attacks. An artistic exposition in the city of Perm entitled "Welcome! Sochi

2014,” supported by controversial art producer Marat Gelman and banned by the authorities shortly after its opening, is a toxic piece of mockery—the display portrayed the Olympics as a totalitarian regime embellishing its image. Putin’s attempts to inflate patriotism through sport is facing challenges even from athletes like three-time Olympic rowing champion Yevgeny Salakhov, who has publicly lambasted the Kremlin for profligacy, mismanagement, and its political manipulations.

In many respects, the holding of sports mega-events helps undermine the coherence of Putin’s nationalist and conservative discourse by opening new space for the public to articulate issues like tolerance, lifestyle diversity, and human rights. Tolerance was the catchword for a campaign in support of AIDS-infected individuals held in Kazan within the framework of the Universiade. The international LGBT community has launched a media campaign protesting the detention and deportation of four Dutch citizens in Russia for homosexual propaganda that, according to a recent law passed by the State Duma, constitutes a legal offense in Russia. Instead of calling for an Olympic boycott, as some U.S. senators proposed after Moscow agreed to consider Edward Snowden’s asylum petition, campaigners called for turning the Sochi Olympics from a Russia-centric event to a cosmopolitan one, in which universal values of human dignity trump parochial nationalist identities.

### **Authoritarian Mobilization**

Sports mega-events can only take place in Russia through the comprehensive mobilization of administrative resources. News reports asserted that many elements of the Universiade—from ticket distribution to construction works—were achieved through reliance on an opaque administrative system that created the preconditions for multiple abusive and corrupt practices. The same goes for the Sochi Olympics: the borderline between state-owned and non-state assets has remained intentionally flexible, and spheres of responsibility between different levels of authority—and even individuals—have been deliberately blurred. For example, Putin’s public questioning in February 2013 of Dmitry Kozak and other officials, responsible for gross mismanagement of Olympic construction, made clear that many of the managers failed to differentiate between private investments and credits from Sberbank, which counts the state as one of its largest shareholders. Administrative conflicts within the government—for example, between the Ministry for Regional Development, which manages the bulk of funds assigned for the Sochi Olympics, and the *Gosstroy* state corporation, in charge of construction works—only further discredits the proverbial “vertical of power.”

All this has material consequences. One is the quality of construction works: for instance, the building of the Information Center in Kazan was damaged by heavy rain during the Universiade. Poor-quality construction was also a problem at the APEC summit held in Vladivostok in September 2012, when a highway especially constructed for the event subsequently eroded. The exorbitant costs set by *Olympstroy*, the key contractor for the Olympics, are another issue; Russia’s national ice hockey team could not afford to pay for its training in Sochi and had to choose another location.

The issue of how to manage Olympic infrastructure after the Games is already being debated. Irina Rodnina, a famous Soviet-era figure skating champion and now a member of parliament from the ruling United Russia, suggested that a top ice hockey team might be transferred to Sochi to play in the newly constructed Olympic arena. This illustrates the continued reliance in Russia on a purely administrative approach to sports management, largely void of economic rationale and evocative of Soviet-style administrative culture.

### **Room for Exception**

Sports mega-events often involve the temporary suspension of normal rules. Many families in Sochi lost their homes in evictions that were legalized by a presidential decree in 2007 to facilitate the procedure of expropriating land for Olympic construction (reimbursements turned out to be time-consuming and unfair). By the same token, the Universiade was a pretext for the postponement of a high-profile police-abuse trial, accelerating local military conscription, and towing away vehicles to reduce traffic and congestion. Such exceptional measures facilitate the misuse of public competences and strengthen the regime's corrupt components.

Security concerns only increased the scale of special measures. On the eve of the Universiade, Tatarstan's authorities publicly announced that they had reached an informal deal with religious extremists to temporarily discontinue their activities. Public order in Sochi is supposed to be partly protected by Cossack patrols, an indication of the state's limited ability to manage domestic security challenges. Reliance on regional elites in the North Caucasus also appears to be an important element of the Sochi project: Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has pledged to liquidate the terrorist Doku Umarov for openly threatening to foil security during the Olympic Games.

That said, exceptional measures can occasionally be for the better. The federal government has lifted visa procedures for official delegations participating in international sports event in Russia, starting with the Universiade. This gesture of goodwill is meant to demonstrate Russia's eagerness to support visa facilitation, a stumbling block in Russia's relations with the EU. Moscow has also given its informal assurance to the International Olympic Committee that a new law criminalizing gay "propaganda" will not be implemented during the Sochi Olympics. This, of course, vindicates the fact that Russia's restrictive domestic regulations deeply conflict with the dominant democratic standards and very spirit of the Olympic movement.

### **Sports and International Politics**

It is evident that the maxim of "sport above politics" is either wishful thinking or self-delusion. Mega-events will always provide terrain for the articulation of diverse political messages. Popular sports—especially football (soccer) but also ice hockey—often produce politically-tinged messages that accord with a policy of state-sponsored patriotism but challenge the country's international credentials and domestic unity. Past memories will always bear political connotations, be it Circassian protests against the repressive policies of the Russian Empire or a putative (and overwrought) parallel

between the Putin-patronized Sochi project and the 1936 Olympic Games in Nazi Germany.

The fact that an increasing number of sports events are held in non-Western countries raises an important political question—how do these events redefine cultural and sociopolitical boundaries between host countries and the West? Do they bring non-Western states closer to the Western normative order, or do they push them away from it? Non-Western states are particularly keen to take political advantage of hosting sports projects. The mayor of Gwangju, South Korea, host city of the next Summer Universiade, made an explicitly political statement in Kazan by suggesting that in 2015 the two Korean states would field a single team. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, at a reception for his country's returning student team, proudly noted that Azerbaijan came "in ninth place in Europe and first place among Muslim countries" – a statement directly referencing the country's identity. Ukrainian Vice-Premier Konstantin Gryschenko cheered Ukraine's student team in the aftermath of the Universiade, underlining its contribution to the prestige of Ukraine's higher education worldwide and to the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, both of which the government counts among its top priorities.

Against this backdrop, the key challenge is not to avoid inevitable political overlays but to make them effective. For instance, U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, who visited Kazan during the Universiade, drew a parallel with the United States' "ping-pong diplomacy," which played a role in bridging the gap with China during the Cold War. In so doing, he advocated a re-interpretation of the political meaning attached to sports mega-events from an emanation of nationalist sentiment to an interface for open interaction between states and societies.

There are some signs that sports mega-events can perform such a function. The forthcoming Sochi Olympics gave new impetus to Russia's security cooperation with the United States and Great Britain. Cooperation with private business can also play a positive role. The largest German, French, Austrian, and Swiss corporations investing in Sochi projects may be motivated by profit, but their operations can have deeper effects that help engender social change. For example, the telecommunications sector is developing networked communications, internet-based communities, and new social media all relatively independently from the state. European investors are also bringing their business cultures and promoting institutional standards like public-private partnerships, which became one of Russia's priorities during its current G20 presidency.

Yet Russia's preparations for the Olympic Games, with their rampant corruption and clan-based system of financial distribution, have yet to provide proof that foreign investments are making the Russian economy more transparent and accountable. On the contrary, a certain part of the Russian business community is loath to share its lavish contracts with foreign partners. A bill banning foreign citizens and companies from participating in the organization of mass events in Russia is expected to be submitted to parliament this fall by Russian Federation Council member Sergei Lisovsky. For many sectors in Russian society, globalization is associated not with new opportunities but risks, which must be quelled by administrative measures.

## Conclusion

Every sports mega-event is a blend of entertainment, symbolic and carnivalesque performances, celebrations of national pride, and managerial technocracy. Yet these events are also sources of political messages and ideological expressions. The Olympic Games, as seen from a political perspective, are meant to confirm Russia's claim to normalcy and ability to provide world-class security. However, they also open avenues for portraying the Russian government as corrupt and mismanaged, unable to effectively tackle either hard or soft security challenges, and insensitive to environmental issues. The success of the Sochi Olympics in further socializing Russia internationally may be limited. Of greater consequence, perhaps, is the growing domestic disdain to the blend of bad governance and artificial patriotism with which the Kremlin's hosting of sports mega-events is increasingly associated.

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