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## The Most Consequential World Cup in History?

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Sporting Mega Events rarely have a direct impact on current events and tend to be seen as reflective of international politics on other levels. Yet as the world prepares for the first post-pandemic World Cup in Qatar this November, the previous host, Russia, finds itself in a highly dangerous war in Ukraine. The Russo-Ukrainian war, which began in February 2022, was not the quick success most Russian (and Western) commentators expected, nor has it turned out that the Ukrainian army has collapsed. The on-the-job training of the simmering Donbas conflict since 2014, spontaneous patriotism of society, and the pre-war support from NATO members (to say nothing of the support once it had broken out) have forged the Ukrainian army into one capable of holding its own against the Russians. Why did Russia allow the strategically disastrous eight-year hiatus between initial and subsequent invasions?

This memo argues that the Russia 2018 World Cup was part of a set of incentives that ultimately proved sufficient to dissuade President Vladimir Putin from launching the invasion earlier. The time this bought improved the Ukrainian army immensely, which may just have made FIFA 2018 the most consequential World Cup in history. The case is made for such a position by first demonstrating the dramatic improvement in Ukraine's military between 2014 and 2022. Had the Russian army pushed further into Ukraine in 2014, it would probably have had a relatively simple time in subduing its opponent. Second, the subjugation of Ukraine was consistent not only with previous approaches since Putin came to power but also with his broader goals regarding Russia's place in the world. Third and finally, the World Cup is a sufficiently prestigious event to render plausible the notion that Putin delayed the full invasion of Ukraine partially out of fear of losing hosting rights. Taken together, these points suggest that football mattered, at least in this case.

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## The Improving Ukrainian Army 2014-2022

Between 2014 and 2022, Ukraine's army underwent major improvements. Much of this improvement had come by 2018. This can be seen in both the quantity of its forces as well as their quality. **Table 1** below shows the status of Ukraine's armed forces in January 2014 (before the first Russian invasion) taken from the Global Firepower website,<sup>2</sup> data from 2019 (reflecting the 2018 report), and data from February 2022 just before the invasion.

**Table 1: Comparison of Numeric Ukrainian Military Strength (2014, 2019, 2022)**

Index	2014	2019	2022
Overall Index (0=perfect)	0.8255	0.5082	0.3266
Comparative Standing	21/106	29/137	22/142
Active Personnel	160,000	205,000	500,000
Planes	400	260	318
Tanks	4,112	2,031	2,526

On practically all indicators, the strength of the Ukrainian military improved greatly. The most significant increase came in the size of the military, with an estimated strength of 500,000: a nearly three-fold increase from 2014 probably attributable to the threat of imminent invasion. The increase in quality, however, must have been palpable as the Ukrainian power index increased between 2014 and 2019, even as the volume of equipment declined. Indeed, much of the old stock of equipment was replaced by newer versions. This inference is also supported by the historical record, as almost as soon as the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine had settled into familiar routines confined to Donbas, NATO began training and improving Ukrainian military forces. A [statement](#) from the Warsaw NATO summit in July 2016, for instance, outlines that:

NATO's level of engagement with Ukraine since 2014, both at the political level and in terms of practical work, has been unprecedented... NATO will continue to engage in close political dialogue in the framework of the NATO-Ukraine Commission and support Ukraine in carrying out its ambitious reform agenda, including by making the best use of the Annual National Programme, the Planning and Review Process, and the CAP. The CAP's aim is to consolidate and enhance NATO's assistance aimed at helping Ukraine to become more resilient, to better provide for its own security, and to carry out needed reforms, including in the security and defence sector... The CAP contains more than 40 areas where NATO will support Ukraine in reforms conducted by the Ukrainian government. Allies will continue their support to Ukraine through the NATO Representation to Ukraine, as well as bilaterally providing advice and support, particularly for Ukraine's defence and security structures.

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<sup>2</sup> For the 2014 data, see [World Military Strength Comparison \(archive.org\)](#), for the 2019 data, see [2019 Ukraine Military Strength \(archive.org\)](#), and for the 2022 data, see [Global Firepower - 2022 World Military Strength Rankings](#).

NATO's training and security-improvement measures for Ukraine seem to have played a critical role in improving Ukraine's military. It was that improved training that proved critical, and if it had not happened, today's war would be very different. We do not have to imagine what would have happened had Russia invaded earlier – the intervention by just 4,000 Russian conventional troops in 2014 and the subsequent Ukrainian defeats at Ilovaisk and Debaltseve [provide](#) enough facts on which to infer an outcome. Moreover, Putin was under pressure from nationalist thinkers in Russia, such as Egor Kholmogorov and Aleksandr Sevast'ianov, to intervene further on the side of the secessionists. Some scholars attribute this to the Kremlin not wanting to lose control of the nationalist demon which they had summoned, although this happened anyway. Whatever the truth, by dithering, the Kremlin lost its most opportune time for the invasion.

Similarly, the stop-start nature of the Russian invasion also allowed time for NATO countries to prepare to send massive amounts of military aid to Ukraine. As of August 1, the United States alone had [contributed](#) more than \$8 billion to Ukrainian defense, and weapon systems from NLAWs, HIMARS, and Javelins have been pouring into the country. This is not even to mention the coordinated action to sanction Russia's economy and remove the country from the SWIFT banking system. While it is difficult to be certain of counterfactual scenarios, the shock and surprise with which the world greeted the annexation of Crimea suggests the rapidity of such assistance at least would not have been so great. All of this begs the question: Why did the Russians wait to launch their invasion? Part of the answer lies in the hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

### **Putin's Fears**

I argue here that Putin postponed his wish to invade Ukraine fully partly from fear of losing the right to host the 2018 World Cup. One of Putin's central aims since coming to power has been the re-establishment of Russia as a great power. This has been a consistent goal dating back to the 2000 refusal of Russia to swallow its pride and allow foreign intervention to rescue the sailors of the Kursk submarine.

Putin has also been highly concerned with the perceived or actual sporting prowess of the Russian Federation.<sup>3</sup> Marlene Laruelle [argues](#) that Putin saw in "soft power" a way of [returning](#) Russia to the top tier of international relations. After all, only countries capable of holding complex international Sporting Mega Events would be given the right to host them. Given the connection between sports and soft power, it would certainly seem that the supposed soft power returns from Sporting Mega Events for Russia would be sufficient. Indeed, Robert Orttung and Sufian Zhemukhov argue that the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics [signified](#) Russia "rising from its knees."

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<sup>3</sup> See Richard Arnold, "[Sport and domestic 'soft power' in Russia: Take the skinheads bowling](#)," in *Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup*, Routledge, 2021.

Yet the speed and willingness with which Russia sacrificed any soft power returns from the Sochi 2014 Olympics oppose this line of thinking. Indeed, the closing ceremonies had not even finished before “polite people” began the takeover of Ukrainian military installations on the Crimean Peninsula. Similarly, the doping scandal at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics – under which the country’s national security and intelligence services were involved in elaborate plots to allow athletes to pass clean-urine tests – detracted severely from any soft power benefits. Granted, the Russians believed they would not be found out, but it seems naïve to suggest no one had thought of the possibility they might be. All of this suggests that “soft power” was not the main reason Russia wanted to host such events, and the prestige of the event itself was instead the trophy sought.

In an earlier study, Andrew Foxall and I [postulated](#) that the Winter Olympics might be considered the bronze medal of Sporting Mega Events but that the World Cup was surely the gold. Not only is the soccer tournament considerably longer than the Winter Olympics, but it also attracts more viewers and is acknowledged as more prestigious. After all, it is stated policy of the Chinese government to host a World Cup before 2050. The thought of losing the prize, which Russia and Putin had been awarded, the most important Sporting Mega Event of them all, was part of the deterrent that made Putin bide his time until after it was complete, and then COVID-19 hit. As it is, Putin did not wait until the pandemic was truly over to launch his “Special Military Operation.”

### **Russian Foreign Policy in Symphony With Sport**

The central conjecture of this memo – that Putin was deterred from launching an earlier invasion when it would have been easier for him due in part to the World Cup – is lent further support by the way in which Russian foreign policy has been in syncopation with Sporting Mega Events over the last eight years. This is best shown by three of the six most recent Sporting Mega Events. Putin waited until the end of the 2014 Olympic Games to begin the annexation of Crimea and the instigation of separatism in Donbas. As the closing ceremonies were underway in Sochi, just across the sea, Russia was secretly infiltrating the autonomous republic and making plans to dismember Ukraine. There was as little appetite to ruin the “party” while it was underway as there was to show remorse for instigating secessionism after it had finished.

Second, in the run-up to the World Cup in 2018, Russia ostensibly tried to negotiate peace with Ukraine through the Minsk accords. The failure of Minsk I led to the Minsk II accords, which were signed on February 12, 2015, and contained a series of measures designed to de-escalate tensions and reform the Ukrainian state. Sporadic fighting continued for the next seven years along the line of contact, during which time Russia routinely distributed heavy weapons to the Donbas secessionists. Why maintain a Potemkin peace process? Why not openly declare war at a more opportune time, as has been done now? One answer is fear of losing the right to host the 2018 World Cup, which

could have been a central part of any sanctions package as was indeed [urged](#) by American senators and British parliamentarians alike.

Indeed, following 2015 there were no sizeable Russian troop buildups on the Ukrainian border until after the 2018 World Cup. The first major buildup of Russian troops came in June 2021, after the initial shock of the COVID pandemic. [According](#) to *The New York Times* journalist Andrew Kramer, “the movements appear to be the largest deployment of Russian land forces toward the border with Ukraine in seven years.” By June, Russia had relinquished and withdrawn its troops, and the timing of the actual invasion of Ukraine suggests this was in deference to Chinese wishes not to overshadow Beijing’s hosting of the Winter Olympics, which made Beijing the first city to host both the Summer and Winter Games.

Putin’s willingness to accommodate hypothetical Chinese requests regarding sport can also be seen in the actual timing of the invasion. Putin waited until after the end of the Beijing Winter Olympics to initiate his special operation. Sufficient numbers of Russian troops had arguably been in the position since at least December 2021, and many soldiers apparently believed no invasion would come. A week before the arrival of the Olympic torch in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhou Lijian had [claimed](#), “there is no limit to mutual trust between China and Russia, there is no no-go zone in our strategic cooperation, and there is no limit to how far our long-standing friendship can go.” Not wishing to spoil China’s party, Russia waited for the festival of sport to finish (although, of course, not the Paralympic Games) on February 20 before launching its invasion on February 24. The timing of the invasion of Ukraine, like other Russian foreign policy moves over the last eight years, appears dictated by the rhythm of international sport.

## Conclusion

The promise of hosting the FIFA 2018 World Cup and the diplomatic furor that would have ensued had a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine come prior to 2022, as well as the shock of the pandemic, allowed Ukraine time to reform and modernize its military. Despite Putin’s latest harsh rhetoric and new mobilization, Ukrainian forces are performing so well that there has been serious conjecture about whether they might defeat Russia on the battlefield and even retake Crimea. Should that happen, it would arguably make the FIFA 2018 World Cup the most consequential World Cup in history.