



## WINTER OLYMPICS/WORLD CUP

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## Using the Olympics for Political Gain: Russia and South Korea Compared

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### Abstract

South Korea's leaders derived much greater benefit from hosting the Olympics than the Russian leadership did. The Olympics are important because they shine an international media spotlight on the host country for years of build up and three weeks of sporting competition. Ultimately, no matter how hard the PR efforts to deflect it, this spotlight reveals the real nature of the society it puts under the magnifying glass.

### Sports and Politics

The Olympic movement and International Olympic Committee leaders claim to be apolitical, asserting that their main interest is in advancing the cause of world peace by bringing young people together for friendly athletic competition. Most host country leaders naturally see things through their own lenses, which instead highlight efforts to use the Olympics to achieve specific national foreign policy goals. These goals range from boosting the image of the country in the international arena to more specific interests in improving relations with neighboring countries.

South Korea in the 2018 PyeongChang Games proved more effective at using the soft power associated with sporting mega-events to accomplish its foreign policy goals than Russia did with the 2014 Sochi events, even though both were equally successful in hosting world-class athletic competitions. Drawing lessons from the experience of the two countries shows under which conditions sports can help boost a country's image and when such events are unlikely to help.

Sports mega-events like the World Cup, which Russia will host this summer, and the Olympics are unique because they manage to focus the attention of a wide international viewing public that consists of billions of individuals on a specific country for several weeks. In the current media environment, when most media consumers have numerous choices to attract their attention, sports mega-events provide a valuable resource for leaders looking for a platform to make a statement.

### War and Peace

Much of Russia's identity is focused on its military achievements. World War II remains the defining event for the state and its anniversary is celebrated every year with parades on Red Square. Today, Russia is one of the world's largest arms exporters and champions its military might in the competition with the U.S. and by bolstering the regime in Syria.

This martial theme, with its overtones of nationalism and links to physical competition, has obvious links to sports, but it is an uneasy fit for the Olympics. The IOC, for example, would not allow Russia to celebrate

the World War II military heritage in the Sochi opening ceremony because the Olympic movement is dedicated to peace. Russia managed to present a positive image of its history without stressing its battlefield victories, but this was out of step with the usual narrative the Kremlin now pursues in justifying the current leadership.

Of course, the fact that Russia began its invasion of Ukraine even while the games were underway further undermined any soft power gains that Vladimir Putin hoped to draw from his enormous personal and financial investment. In fact, Sochi had no immediate international legacy because world attention quickly shifted to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the fighting in the Donbas as soon as the Olympics were over. The resulting Western sanctions blocked Sochi from evolving into the international tourist destination that the Olympic brand might have fostered.

South Korea is no less interested in world status than Russia, but used the 2018 winter Olympics more effectively to boost its soft power by focusing attention on its rapid and peaceful economic development over the last several decades. These gains have lifted the country from among the poorest to one of the most advanced.

The South Korean leadership also used the Olympics to try to build a better relationship with North Korea, which has been one of the key goals of President Moon Jae-in. The Olympics provided an opportunity to make peaceful overtures to the North that included marching together as one nation in the opening ceremony and using the diplomatic opportunities provided by the games to try to facilitate greater contacts with North Korea's reclusive leadership, which also saw the games as an opportunity to score diplomatic successes.

The momentum generated by the games created an opening in which North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un invited US President Donald Trump to meet in person for negotiations. Trump's surprise decision to accept was a major victory for South Korea's leaders, though whether the meeting actually takes place or leads to any substantive progress in the ultimate goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula remain to be seen. Regardless of what Trump does, the South Koreans have demonstrated great skill in opening up an exit to the

dangerous antagonism that was developing as the North Korean and American leaders hurled insults at each other.

### Spotlight on Corruption

In his approach to the games, Putin sought to use the Olympics to highlight Russia's ability to perform as an advanced capitalist country. He sought to show that his government was capable of taking on a complex task, such as building a world-class international winter resort where none existed before, and executing the project successfully and competently. The Sochi Olympics were to stand as a counterpoint to the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which celebrated the development of a socialist model in the face of a hostile world.

Coverage of the games, however, tended to emphasize the enormous price tag for the Sochi development. At \$55 billion, which included the cost of infrastructure upgrades for the resort and the surrounding area, the price tag rose even above what China paid for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. With Putin's cronies receiving massive state-funded contracts for prominent construction projects that ran into the billions of dollars, the event cemented perceptions of high levels of corruption in Russia.

South Korea is also afflicted with extensive corruption and many commentators compare Russia's oligarchs to Korea's chaebols. The country has long battled corruption, and in March 2017 Korean courts removed President Park Chung-hee from office, following massive protests provoked by a corruption scandal. Such an event, so hard to imagine in Putin's Russia, took place less than a year before the PyeongChang opening ceremonies. Rather than tarnishing Korea's image, though, the events demonstrated that the rule of law could overcome pervasive cronyism when the public demonstrated a strong desire for change.

The ultimate cost of the Korean games was \$12.9 billion, according to Forbes. While the price tag was much higher than estimated in the bid, \$1.5 billion for the actual Games and \$2 billion to \$6 billion for infrastructure, all Olympics exceed initial cost projections and the figures did not lead to the kind of negative publicity that surrounded the Sochi games, where the costs broke records.

Ironically, though Korea experienced much greater political turbulence in the run-up to the games, it demonstrated greater skill in managing its political in-fighting to project an image of competence and rule-of-law in managing the political and diplomatic events surrounding the games.

### Winning Medals as a Metric

Going into the Sochi games, Russia's leadership was obsessed with winning the most medals, particularly

gold medal, especially in light of the Russian team's poor performance in the 2010 Vancouver games. Elevating medals over morals ultimately led to the doping scandal that is continuing to define the legacy of the Sochi Olympics. As Grigory Rodchenkov, the head of the Russian anti-doping laboratory lays out in detail in the Oscar-winning film *Icarus*, the Russian state organized a comprehensive effort to use every means possible to ensure that Russian athletes outperformed the competition. And, the effort was initially a success, as Russia had won the most medals and gold medals at the end of the competition.

However, as whistle blowers and media investigations were able to reveal the extent of the cheating, the IOC was forced to investigate the nature of the victories and has begun to strip away some of the medals. The process has continued in fits and starts, with some bodies overruling others, meaning ownership of the medals and who actually won has shifted around in confusing fashion, often making it hard for all but the most diligent fans to keep track of the standings. But, in reputational terms, the damage was done, preventing some Russian athletes from competing in the 2016 summer and 2018 winter Olympics and Russia being banned from the 2018 games. The IOC reinstated Russia's Olympic committee at the conclusion of the Korean games, but Russia has yet to make any real reforms or admit to wrong doing in a way that would make real change possible.

South Koreans do not have the same overwhelming sports ambitions and instead focused on a few events where they traditionally do well. The host country finished seventh in the overall medal standings, but winning overall was not a driving factor. Looking forward to the World Cup, Russia can also benefit from not having to worry about high expectations for winning the championship since it does not have a history of soccer dominance.

### Conclusion: The Limits of the Olympics to Provoke Change

Developing countries ranging from China to Brazil and Russia have sought to use mega-sporting events as a way to announce their presence on the world stage. The massive publicity surrounding the events certainly can give prominence to places that were less well known in the past.

However, the recent games in these countries have demonstrated the limits that the Olympics can provide for reputation and brand building. The Olympics can help solidify trends that are heading in the right direction. This was the case for Korea in 2018, where its president sought to build diplomatic momentum for his

efforts to reorganize relations between the northern and southern halves of the peninsula. The 1988 Seoul Olympics had earlier helped South Korea make the transition from a military dictatorship to a democracy, speeding up processes that were already underway.

But the harsh spotlight of the international media does not always work in favor of the national leaders. Rather than allowing them to bask in the success of a prominent sporting event it can help expose the bigger

problems in societies. The doping scandal that came to prominence after the Sochi Olympics has done extensive damage to Russia's soft power. At the same time, even having international attention focused on this issue does not mean that it can exert enough pressure to force change in sporting practices, to say nothing of the underlying political and economic drivers that cause these problems in the first place.

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## ANALYSIS

# Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Russian Sports Ambassadors as Agents of Soft Power in the Age of the "Information War"

By Vitaly Kazakov, The University of Manchester

## Abstract

Russian political elites relied on internationalist rhetoric and personal pleas to secure the rights to host two sporting mega-events in Russia in the 2010s. The early soft power promise of these events did not materialize, however, as Russia found itself in the midst of multiple geopolitical crises and the so-called "information war" with the West. This article examines the role of Russia's political leaders, global sports stars Maria Sharapova and Alexander Ovechkin, and Russian football fans as ambassadors for Russia through the prism of direct and indirect modes of soft power exertion and nation branding in the context of sports. We argue that these important agents did not fulfil their potential to change international outlooks on the Russian state at a turbulent period.

## The Context

Academic works have described the difficulties of employing the concept of soft power in relation to the Kremlin's efforts to engage with the international community over the past decade (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). The world of international sporting events nevertheless remains a field where Russian authorities have continued their pursuit of projecting a positive, attractive image of the country to international audiences through means reminiscent of soft power and nation branding paradigms. The hosting of two mega-events—the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup—and participation in major sports competitions is proving to be a fruitful area for the re-negotiation of contemporary Russia's international image in the 2010s.

Joseph Nye distinguishes between direct and indirect modes of exertion of soft power: the former man-

ifests itself when countries' elites attempt to influence each other, while the latter refers to the ability of wider society to pressure its elites after being impressed by the soft power attraction of another country. Both emphasize the role of the people—elites and common citizens—to be agents of soft power (Nye 2011). Similarly, nation branding theory places an emphasis on celebrities and common people as important proponents of advancement of their country's positive image abroad (Fan 2010). The 2014 Olympics, the upcoming World Cup, and participation in major sporting tournaments over the last decade have focused the spotlight of international media onto Russian political elites, athletes, and fans. This short article explores some of the tensions arising from the efforts by all these groups to positively frame an image of Russia to international audiences.

## From Internationalist Rhetoric to the Escalation of Informational Rivalries at the Sochi Games

During his speech at the International Olympic Committee session in Guatemala City in 2007—where the 2014 Winter Olympics were awarded to Sochi—Russia's President Vladimir Putin personally vouched for these Games to be a success. Reportedly, it was the first time he delivered a public speech in English; according to some commentators, the “suppliant tone [of the speech was] rarely heard before from Putin, and certainly never heard since” (Walker 2018, p. 105). The personal plea and commitment of the Russian President arguably played a part in securing the right to host contemporary Russia's first Olympic Games, as international sports officials saw the Kremlin's openness and desire to demonstrate the new image of the country to the world. A few years later, it was Vitaly Mutko—then Russia's Minister of Sport, Tourism and Youth Policy—who delivered a similar speech prior to the vote to decide the 2018 World Cup host at FIFA's headquarters. Mutko made light of having difficulty delivering his speech in English by pledging to learn to speak the language as well as his UK colleagues by the time the tournament began. Personal commitment to these events and the lighter tone used by Russia's political elites served as a direct soft power tool to position themselves, and Russia by association, as modern, open, and friendly. On the wave of economic growth and relative stability in international relations in the mid-2000s, Russian authorities' softer approach to bringing these events to Russia was successful.

Espousing Olympic values is almost automatically imposed on the host country upon being awarded the opportunity to host the Games. If the rhetoric of inclusivity and international cooperation through hosting the Games may have helped to consolidate domestic support for the current regime in Russia, the increased international focus of foreign guests prior to and during the Sochi Games exposed the tension between the country's advertised adherence to Western and broader internationalist ideals in the context of the Games and the conservative turn in domestic political discourse in the early 2010s (Aleksyeva 2014). The softer rhetorical offensive to promote a positive image of Russia in the years leading up to the Games turned into an escalating informational “self-defence” where the promises of the organizers were tested by the reality of members of the international community visiting Russia. It resulted in an exchange of jabs between the Western press and Russian media on a range of issues, from human rights to the preparedness of Sochi's facilities for the Games. During its news coverage of the Olympics, *RT*—Russia's

chief international news network originally conceived as a soft power tool, although no longer understood as such (Hutchings and others 2015)—often dedicated more air-time to debunking negative framing of Sochi in Western media rather than pushing a positive image of the host country's culture, history, and supposed prosperity to its international audiences (Kazakov forthcoming).

Fast-forward a decade from Putin's speech in Guatemala, and the so-called “information war” between Russia and Western powers is now at its height. Coupled with the bleak reality of scandals shaking Russian sports ahead of the 2018 World Cup, this makes the upcoming tournament an even harder sell as the product of a coherent soft power or nation branding strategy as originally described by Joseph Nye and Simon Anholt. What has gone wrong with the attempts to present Russia as an attractive modern country through these events and other sports competitions? Outside the obvious geopolitical crises involving Russia in recent years, we consider the role of Russia's sport stars and fans in contributing to the increasingly negative perception of the country in international media.

## Russia's Sports Ambassadors in the 2010s: Missteps and Misunderstandings

It is often the country's most visible public figures—such as entertainment or sports stars—who give broader international audiences a sense of what their home country is like. Of all the popular figures in Russian sports today, it is perhaps Maria Sharapova and Alexander Ovechkin who are considered to be the most internationally recognizable. Sharapova rocketed to international stardom through a combination of her tennis prowess and her success as a model, businesswoman, and ambassador for international organizations. Born in Russia, she spent most of her adult life abroad, becoming a cosmopolitan idol and an example of a contemporary Russian woman achieving great success on the international stage. Her status as an ambassador for Russian sports has been solidified through her inclusion as one of the torchbearers during the Sochi Olympics' Opening Ceremony—an honour usually reserved for the most celebrated athletes and public figures.

In recent years, however, her reputation has suffered an unexpected blow: in 2016, Sharapova tested positive for a banned performance enhancement drug, leaving the international sporting community in shock. It was especially notorious because Sharapova lives, trains, and competes abroad, presumably with the highest possible levels of support and coaching available to a world class athlete. That such a high-profile sports star was disgraced by a doping ban certainly does not enhance the image of less recognizable Russian athletes and the country's



domestic sports programme more broadly. This instance was just the first in a series of doping scandals that have consequently shaken Russian sports. Sharapova's ban from competitions was eventually cut short, and she has since returned to competing professionally, but she has yet to achieve a level of success comparable to the early stages of her career. The reputational damage to one of Russia's greatest athletes, and the Russian sports system by association, has been done.

Alexander Ovechkin is another global sports star who has played an important role in projecting the image of contemporary Russia to international sports audiences. Like Sharapova, Ovechkin spends most of his professional life competing in the US. He has been committed to representing Russia in international competitions whenever possible and has proven to be a strong supporter of the current political regime in Russia. Notably, he was one of the most vocal advocates for National Hockey League (NHL) players to participate in the Winter Olympic hockey tournaments. When the NHL threatened to avoid sending its players to the 2018 Olympics, Ovechkin disclosed his intention to defy the league's authorities by joining Team Russia in any case. Ultimately, however, the player softened his stance and accepted the league's decision not to participate in the 2018 Olympics. Some commentators in Russia pointed to the supposed betrayal of his patriotic plea through his choice to honour his contract in the US instead. More curious, however, was Ovechkin's decision to launch a public movement called *PutinTeam* just weeks after confirming he would not take part in the 2018 Olympics. Supposedly apolitical, the movement's self-proclaimed goal is to "unite those who are proud of Russia and our President, and who wants to make our country stronger" (Putinteam.ru 2018). In its first months, the movement attracted high-profile athletes, showbusiness personalities, and regular people living in Russia as well as members of the Russian diaspora abroad; however, it is still not clear what programme or serious aims the movement has aside from being a *de facto* President Putin's 'fan club'.

While Ovechkin claims the initiative to form *PutinTeam* was his own, reports suggest that the Kremlin's PR strategists may have played a part in its inception as a way to use Ovechkin's popularity to rally otherwise politically indifferent younger Russians, both in Russia and abroad, ahead of the 2018 Russian presidential election (Maese, Khurshudyan, and Roth 2017). Whether this is true or not, it appears that Ovechkin—one of Russia's most prized soft power assets—has turned to promote his devotion to the current ruling regime in Russia through his domestic politics-focused initiative. It is doubtful such an approach will persuade many of his

admirers in the West to improve their outlook on Russia. Ovechkin's middle ground stance—being devoted both to his professional contract in the US and his domestic political views—ultimately prevented him from fulfilling his potential as a global ambassador for Russian sports during the 2018 Olympics, where he would have been most effective in helping to salvage the battered image of Russian sports. Other famous Russian players, like Pavel Datsyuk and Ilya Kovalchuk, left the NHL and ultimately represented Russian athletes in the 2018 Olympics, where they captured the ice hockey gold medals without Ovechkin's contribution.

### Hooligan or *Gentlefan*? Football Fans as Ambassadors of the FIFA 2018 World Cup

It is not just top athletes who have the chance to project a positive image of a nation during international sporting events: fans and tourists attending these events can also leave a lasting impression of their home country on other guests and observers. The recent example of a group of North Korean fans supporting their team in a highly-choreographed fashion at the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics contrasted sharply with other fans' behaviour and provided poignant insight into the nature of North Korea's totalitarian society (Haas 2018). On the opposite side of the spectrum was the case of the Icelandic national football team supporters at the 2016 UEFA European Football Championship. The team's unexpected success at the tournament was further highlighted by the colourful support of fans who had travelled from Iceland to cheer on their team with the now iconic "Viking Thunder-Clap"—a method of support that was later borrowed by football supporters around the world. The feat of the Icelandic team and its supporters captured the admiration of other fans and the international press (Stevens 2016), helping to elevate Iceland's international profile and serving as an example of indirect soft power exertion in Nye's definition.

At the Sochi Olympics, the Russian people—as fans and volunteers—welcomed the world in a peaceful and virtually incident-free fashion. At the football tournament in France two years later, fans from Russia also made international news, but, unlike the Icelanders, for the wrong reasons. Prior to and during the England-Russia match in Marseille, a large and well-organised group of Russian hooligans attacked supporters of the English football team, with the self-proclaimed goal of recapturing the status of 'hooligan culture capital' away from England (Telegraph Sport 2016). Following the incident, Igor Lebedev, Deputy Speaker of the Russian Parliament and one of the heads of the Russian Football Union, blamed the French hosts and openly supported the Russian hooligans, tweeting, "Don't see any-

thing wrong about the fans' fight. Conversely, our guys did well. Keep going!" (Petukhov 2016). Such sentiment was far from being shared universally in domestic discourse; however, it gave a sense to Western observers that the example of Russian hooligans' aggression against other European fans was not just passively overlooked but rather encouraged by the Russian authorities, even if this was not necessarily the case. The ugliest side of Russian football hooliganism outshone the forgettable performance of the national football team during the Euro 2016 tournament and contrasted sharply with the peaceful yet powerful support and performance of Iceland at the same tournament. More importantly, it sent alarming signals to the international community just two years before the World Cup in Russia.

In the years since, Russian football authorities have attempted to present a more favourable image of their local fans to the world. Organized under the auspices of the "*Gentlefan: Russian Warm Welcome*" programme, host teams across Russia had given away blankets, raincoats, pillows, and other gifts to international fans attending games against Russian football clubs and at national team fixtures as an attempt to make them feel safe and welcome. On the surface, the campaign worked well: visiting foreign clubs appreciated the gifts and attention, after pre-emptively issuing warnings to fans about being possibly targeted while in Russia (Gibson 2017). The campaign has been called a "stunning fan-led victory" for Russia in the "information war" propagated by both sides (Moore 2017). Some domestic commentators met the programme with enthusiasm, seeing the initiative as a chance to showcase Russian hospitality and rebuild the country's international image, while others sceptically took it as a "propaganda and smoke-and-mirrors" campaign (Readers' comments on Championat.Com 2017a).

The main issue is that reputational damage, such as that suffered at the hands of a group of hooligans at the tournament in France, is hard to erase from memory through a PR-style campaign like *Gentlefan*. The real

test of Russian fans' hospitality will come at the World Cup in 2018. Compared to the Winter Olympics, it is a bigger event in terms of scale and international visibility, with even more international supporters, media personnel, and officials in attendance. The problem of football hooliganism has clearly not been eradicated in Russia. For example, one online observer on the *Gentlefan* initiative wrote: "The blankets [that were given to the foreign supporters] are red so that blood stains are harder to see later" (Reader's comment on Championat.Com 2017b). It will depend on the Russian organizers to keep the hooligans in check, preventing any further damage to Russia's international reputation around this issue.

### Conclusion

Overall, projecting a positive image of Russia at the time of hosted mega-events and other sports competitions has proven to be a challenge, despite earlier promises to build bridges between Russia and the international community. The obvious problems surrounding the geopolitical situation Russia has found itself in is a major reason for this. However, sports-related controversies unfolding over the previous decade have also played a part. Some of these issues included racism in football, Russian authorities' stance on the LGBTQ community, the #SochiProblems social media campaign, the doping scandal, and the ban on Russia's participation in the 2018 Olympic under its own flag. Individual actors and wider sports-related groups had the chance to turn this tide. While the examples of Sharapova, Ovechkin, and Russian football hooligans discussed here are just a few of the many points at which Russia meets the world in the domain of sports—and many positive cases could be found—we argue that these key actors did not fulfill their potential to change outlooks on the Russian state at a turbulent period. Before the 2018 World Cup, Russian elites and common citizens are finding themselves between a rock and a hard place when it comes to projecting a positive image of the country through sport.

#### *About the Author*

Vitaly Kazakov is a PhD Candidate in Russian Studies at the University of Manchester. His doctoral dissertation on the promotion, mediation, and reception of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics is forthcoming in 2019.

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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