

Article

The 2018 FIFA World Cup: The Gains and Constraints of Russia's Soft Power of Attraction Through Football and Sports

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Abstract

This article looks at Russia's strategy to successfully host sporting mega-events, especially the 2018 FIFA World Cup, arguing that through sports and football Russia hopes to increase its soft power and to showcase a favorable image to both its foreign and domestic audiences, different than the one the West is used to. Amid heightened tension with the West, accused of a confrontational behavior and of using harder-edged tools, this article suggests that sports diplomacy is an important element of a long-term strategy to boost Russia's great power status. However, it is argued that Russia's ability to project its influence on a global scale is constrained, either by serious domestic problems and challenges, as by Russia's hard power image. The article points out that Russia still has a long way to go in terms of effectively implementing its soft power, suggesting that the successful staging of big sporting events must be complemented with other soft-power tools in a long-term strategy if it wants to succeed.

Keywords

Russia, Soft Power, Sports Diplomacy, 2018 FIFA World Cup, Foreign Policy

Introduction

Upon his 2012 re-election to the presidency, after a four-year term as prime minister, Vladimir Putin launched a broad Russian-style charm offensive, using both hard and soft power, to expand Russia's global influence and presence. Stronski and Sokolsky (2017) argue that, for the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States is facing a Russia that is not a mere "regional power" (in then President Barack Obama's statement), but rather one that is actively trying to project its influence and establish a global presence.

This article looks at Russia's vision and strategy articulated around and beyond the successful hosting of sporting mega-events, especially the 2018 FIFA World Cup, arguing that through sports and football Russia hopes to increase its soft power and to showcase a favorable image to both its foreign and domestic audiences, different than the one the West is used to. Amid heightened tension with the West and talk of a new Cold War, accused of a confrontational behavior and of using harder-edged tools, this article suggests that "sports diplomacy" is an important source of Russia's foreign policy toolbox and an integral part of a long-term strategy to advance its great power status. However, the article argues that Russia's ability to project its influence and "win hearts and minds" on a global scale is constrained, either by serious domestic problems and challenges, as by Russia's hard power image. The article points out that Russia still has a long way to go in terms of effectively implementing its soft power, suggesting that the successful hosting of big sporting events must be complemented with other soft-power tools in a long-term strategy if it wants to succeed. And, most importantly, that the positive image arguably generated by Russia's successful hosting of the World Cup needs to match its actions, not only its rhetoric.

Structurally, the article begins by recognizing Russia's struggle for soft power in order to promote a favorable and an "accurate image of Russia abroad" (Putin 2012a). It then turns to the concept of "sports diplomacy", explaining why it is in Russia's interest to host big sporting events, suggesting that sports are an increasingly key element of its public diplomacy toolbox. The third and final section of the article looks at Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, assessing its gains and constraints.

Russia's Struggle for Soft Power

In a globalizing world, it is not enough to have or to be an economic or military power. As Joseph S. Nye (2013) puts it: "if you can add the soft power of attraction to your toolkit, you can economize on carrots and sticks", explaining why Russia seeks to leverage soft power. Coined by Nye in the late 1980's, soft power is "the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion" (2004 p. 5), adding that:

"the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)". (Nye 2013).

Furthermore, Nye (2013) argues that *"combining these resources is not always easy"*.

The concept of soft power entered in Russia's official 2013 Foreign Policy Concept. In its pre-election article on foreign policy, "Russia and the Changing

World”, Vladimir Putin (2012a) observed that soft power “implies a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence”, adding a rather negative idea of soft power:

“Regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries” (2012a).

According to Dolinski (2012), there is a difference between the definitions offered by Nye and Putin, “which is far from being stylistic”. While Nye points out attractiveness as the key element of the notion, Putin views soft power as part of several “levers of influence” Russia can use.

After his presidential inauguration in 2012, Vladimir Putin addressed Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organizations and argued that:

“soft power’ is all about promoting one’s interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one’s country, based not just on its material achievements but also its spiritual and intellectual heritage. Russia’s image abroad is formed not by us and as a result it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country or Russia’s contribution to global civilization, science and culture”. (Putin 2012b).

Hence, Russian leaders looked to soft power as a tool to regain their former influence and to promote a favorable and an “accurate image of Russia abroad” (Putin 2012a).

Russia’s initial aim for exploiting its soft power was economic – to attract international investment in order to modernize the country – and was framed as a need to improve its negative image abroad and establish stronger ties with Russian compatriots in other countries. Sergunin and Karabeshkin argue that “the Kremlin’s turn to the soft power concept over the past decade was not accidental” (2015, p. 359), suggesting that a number of powerful factors, like the need to redesign its foreign policy doctrine in line with present-day challenges, to enhance its international image and Russia’s global status, “encouraged Moscow to familiarize itself with this concept” (2015, p. 359).

More recently, the 2016 new Foreign Policy Concept establishes that:

“soft power’ has become an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives. This primarily includes the tools offered by civil society, as well as various

methods and technologies – from information and communication to humanitarian and other types”. (Russian Federation 2016).

One of Russia’s foreign policy objectives is “to consolidate the Russian Federation’s position as a center of influence in today’s world” (Russian Federation 2016). Others objectives are:

“promote and consolidate the position of the Russian language in the world; raise global awareness of Russia’s cultural achievements and national historical legacy, cultural identity of the peoples of Russia, and Russian education and research; consolidate the Russian-speaking diaspora; to bolster the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia’s perspective on international process to a wider international community”. (Russian Federation 2016).

It is also important to point out other objectives, like “enhancing Putin’s domestic legitimacy by demonstrating Russia’s status as a global superpower; promoting specific Russian commercial, military, and energy interests” (Stronski & Sokolsky 2017).

To advance these objectives, Moscow counts on a wide collection of tools, including soft power ones, such as “diplomatic, military, intelligence, cyber, trade, energy, and financial tools to influence political systems, public attitudes, and elite decision-makers in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America” (Stronski & Sokolsky 2017). Indeed, it is armed with a diverse and effective toolkit and an experienced leader committed to building on the Soviet legacy of global activism (Rumer 2018). President Vladimir Putin’s aim is to make Russia great again and to make the West respect Russia (Zygar 2018). He declared recently: “As head of state I will do everything to build up Russia’s might, prosperity, and glory, and to live up to the expectations and hopes of the country’s citizens” (Putin 2018g).

While Russia is not an economic superpower, the emphasis on nuclear power is one of Russia’s claims to great power status. Recently, according to Vladimir Putin, Russia has developed a new array of nuclear weapons that are invincible and could “reach anywhere in the world” (BBC News 2018a). Also, it is important to note Russia’s veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Finally, as Polyakova (2018) observes, Putin’s intervention in Syria, “like most of his foreign-policy decisions, was a risky gamble”, which could have pitted Russian and Americans against each other, but it has placed Russia back in the game of great-power competition.

Stronski and Sokolsky (2018) argue that “Russia’s global activism is deeply rooted in Putin’s vision of what he wants the world to look like and Russia’s global role

and position in this world". Indeed, Russia sees itself as a major power with global reach. That is why it is looking to develop a presence in all corners of the globe to solidify its image as a world power (Gurganus 2018). Underneath is Moscow's desire for a multipolar international system in which it plays a more prominent role (Stronski & Sokolsky 2017). Most importantly, "Russia aims to increase its clout, refurbish its image, and assert itself on key international issues where re-treating Western power has created vacuums" (Stronski & Sokolsky 2017).

With a proud cultural legacy, Moscow has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in various soft power resources (Rutland & Kazantsev 2016), like the state-controlled media outlets – RT, the former Russia Today International TV, a 24/7 news channel that provides the Kremlin's worldview, established in 2005, and Sputnik News, which in 2014 replaced RIA Novosti, the Russia's international news agency with content in over thirty languages –, and internet social media. These tools promote a positive view of Russia and a negative image of the West, being one of its main tasks to change Russia's negative image in the world and counteract biased assessment:

"Russia seeks to ensure that the world has an objective image of the country, develops its own effective ways to influence foreign audiences, promotes Russian and Russian-language media in the global information space, providing them with necessary government support, is proactive in international information co-operation, and takes necessary steps to counter threats to its information security". (Russian Federation 2016).

In today's interconnected and globalized world the dissemination of national narratives is very important. "As the American analyst John Arquilla has pointed out, in today's global information age, victory often depends not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins" (Nye 2018b). Underneath is the power of soft power in promoting its national interests abroad and of effectively communicating a winning global narrative. Moscow has been using new opportunities in the digital domain to promote narratives conducive to Russian interests and to undermine liberal Western governments, be it through traditional and social media, educational, cultural, and entertainment programs or cyber-enabled information operations. Moreover, in countries with Russian-speaking populations, state-controlled Russian-language media, including pop culture and entertainment programming, are powerful tools (Carnegie 2018). To sum up, new technologies and information are key elements of Russia's foreign policy toolbox, exploiting the vulnerability of open societies to foreign manipulation (Carnegie 2018).

In this respect, Walker and Ludwig (2017) argue that China's and Russia's attempts at influence are not examples of soft power – they represent 'sharp power'. 'Sharp power' has been categorized as the diverging use of soft power-like tactics

by authoritarian states to wield influence, not by a “charm offensive” nor an effort to “win hearts and minds”; “it is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation” (Walker & Ludwig 2017). Thus, sharp power, “the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, is a type of hard power” and “threatens soft power” (Nye 2018a). In November 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May publicly accused Russia of interfering in various Western election campaigns and of “weaponizing information”, by “deploying its state-run media organizations to plant fake stories and photo-shopped images in an attempt to sow discord in the West and undermine our institutions” (May 2017).

Rutland and Kazantsev (2016) argue that while Russia came late to the soft power game, made it an integral feature of the drive to restore Russia’s great power status, investing heavily to promote a positive image of the country abroad. However, Russia’s authoritarian turn since 2004, its use of force in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, have reinforced negative stereotypes of Russia as a hard power, explaining why Russian leaders have largely failed to develop soft power as an effective policy tool (Rutland & Kazantsev 2016). As Kolesnikov observes, “it is impossible for a country to suddenly switch to soft power after years of using force”, adding that “the issues that divide Russia and most Western governments – Crimea, Donbass, MH-17, the Skripal case – are not going away” (2018b).

Other examples that reinforce Russia’s hard power image and undercut its soft power are the Kremlin’s attempts to influence the 2016 Brexit vote, elections interference, namely in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the support of populist and far-right movements in Europe, or fueling ethnic instability and divisions in the Balkans (Stronski & Sokolsky 2018). Moreover, it is worth noting that the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom led to the furthering of sanctions and political isolation, namely to the expulsion of more than 100 Russian diplomats by the United Kingdom and allied countries (BBC News 2018b). Before, the Western governments had already reacted to the military incursion in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea with diplomatic and economic sanctions, and the suspension of Russia indefinitely from the Group of Eight (G8) (Wilson & Morello 2014).

Moscow’s tactics and global activism illustrate that “Russian understanding of soft power strongly deviates from either the ‘classical’, Nye-based one or those suggested by other Western academics and practitioners” (Sergunin & Karabeshkin 2015, p. 359), in which attraction to a country is the key to a country getting what it wants. Instead, “the Russian interpretation of soft power is instrumental, pragmatic and interest-centric” (Sergunin & Karabeshkin 2015, p. 359). Moreover, following Nye, these authors say that Russia is often unable to use soft power in a coherent way, that is, the “need to match words and deeds in their

policies, be self-critical, and unleash the full talents of their civil societies [China and Russia]" (Nye 2013).

Russia recognizes that it needs both hard and soft power, or 'smart power', a term developed by Nye in 2003 (Nye 2009). Despite the frequent use of military force and 'hybrid warfare' in the last decade, the Kremlin has been active using other forms of influence. As was highlighted above, it considers the promotion of its positive image abroad an important priority in its soft power strategy. The following section examines how sports are being used to achieve that aim, that is, to project a positive, innovative and modern image both to the world and to Russia's own citizens.

Russia's Sports Diplomacy Strategy

As was highlighted above, the Kremlin's toolkit is diverse and wide, including soft power resources. This article argues that sports and football are an important source of Russia's foreign policy toolbox, meaning that they are used as significant public and cultural diplomacy's tools to achieve specific targeted goals, namely to enhance international prestige and attraction.

There are four main roles for sports as a component of cultural diplomacy:

"Sports as a tool for development; sports as a tool for soft power; sports as an instrument to promote closer dialogue and integration in multicultural societies; sports as a tool to promote peaceful relations at the international level". (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy 2011b, p. 5).

This analysis favors the dimension of "sports as a tool for soft power" and argues that sports and football are used as diplomatic tools to enhance Russia's soft power.

Sports diplomacy, a term that is gaining more and more relevance (Murray 2012), is identified in this article as the use of sports as an instrument to further foreign policy goals, causes or interests and as a significant and rising source of soft power. Stuart Murray (2013) argues that "practical and theoretical interest in sports diplomacy has been growing", citing some publications that have dedicated a special issue or chapter to this topic, like Public Diplomacy Magazine (Winter 2013), the Hague Journal of Diplomacy (Spring 2013) or the Oxford Handbook on Modern Diplomacy (2013). Also Sport in Society, vol. 17, 2014, devotes its number 9 to Sport and Diplomacy.

This article follows the perspective that associates sports diplomacy to "international sport consciously employed by governments as an instrument of diplomacy" (Murray & Pigman 2014). In fact, sports and football are being used by a

number of countries to achieve specific targeted goals, proving that governments increasingly recognize the power of sports (and mega-events) as a diplomatic tool to raise their profile, and create influence, among other goals. Murray points out that “arguably, sports multiply the channels through which a government can disseminate a diplomatic message to a much wider audience” (2013, p. 14). Thus, sports diplomacy can reinforce and complement a state’s traditional diplomacy (Murray 2013, pp. 12-13).

The recognition of sports diplomacy or the use of sports for political ends is confirmed by the major emerging economies’ attempts to use sporting events as an investment in their global positions, as it is the case of South Africa (Castro 2013b) or China. The Asian nation is also expected to host a FIFA World Cup in the near future, with President Xi Jinping stating his dream of hosting the tournament. This is also true for states who already have a good global status, such as Canada, Japan or France, all of which have won bidding processes to host mega-sporting events in the coming years (Castro 2018). Thus, sporting mega-events are increasingly attractive to governments that invest in them as a diplomatic tool to either enhance international visibility or to change negative perceptions, despite the situation on the ground.

Russia is not an exception in this and has invested, in the recent years, in the hosting of mega-sporting events, as an integral part of its soft power strategy to project a positive image, different than the one the West is used to, more associated with disruption and force, and show of a modern and competent country. In Putin’s words: “we must discuss how we can derive the maximum benefit for Russia’s image from hosting large international events” (2012a). Russia’s successful hosting of the Universiade in Kazan in 2013¹, the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games², the 2016 Ice Hockey World Championship³, and the 2018 FIFA World Cup⁴ are examples which confirm that strategy.

In the case of Russia, as noted by Kolesnikov (2018a), “sport is a matter of state importance. It’s one of the tenets of patriotism”. “Given the unparalleled visibility, popularity, and mobilizing potential of modern sport, accompanied by intense manifestations of identity” (Black & Peacock 2013, p. 535), Russia hopes to attract others also through sports and football. Hence, President Vladimir Putin has consciously invested in sports and football to enhance internationally his country’s image, prestige, legitimacy, credibility, trust and visibility, a process that is also known as nation-branding – the practice of applying corporate branding techniques to promote countries (by trade, tourism and foreign direct investment

¹ The official website: <http://www.kazan2013.com/en>

² The official website: <https://www.olympic.org/sochi-2014>

³ The official website: <http://www.iihfworlds2016.com/>

⁴ The official website: <https://www.fifa.com/worldcup/>

opportunities), to improve their image abroad, to build and manage their reputation, and to counter stereotypes that are associated with certain countries (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy 2011a, p. 4). Indeed, “international sport and sport mega-events have become coveted prizes in the quest for global visibility and ‘marketing power’” (Black & Peacock 2013, p. 541).

The role of the then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was widely acclaimed in securing the 2014 Winter Games for Sochi. It was Vladimir Putin's personal project to showcase Russia to the world and the first time that Russia hosted the Winter Olympics (the then Soviet Union hosted the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow). Sochi was selected as the host city in July 2007, defeating bids from Salzburg (Austria) and Pyeongchang (South Korea). It is important to note that the official decision was taken before the military incursion into Georgia (2008).

Black and Peacock (2013, p. 537) note that “sports diplomacy is often a ‘two-level game’, targeting international and domestic audiences simultaneously”. Indeed, the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics were used by Vladimir Putin to impress through sports, with the objective of presenting a gentler, competent and modern Russia to the world, targeting both international and domestic audiences, and especially showing that the country was back on its role of a global power. While originally budgeted at US\$12 billion, severe cost overruns, alleged to have been the result of corruption, made the Sochi Olympics cost more than \$51 billion – the most expensive sports event ever organized (Grohmann 2014a). The President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, said that the Russian government support and President Vladimir Putin's personal involvement were crucial to push preparations forward and to the Games' success (Grohmann 2014b).

It is important to add that big sporting events are never without protest, controversy and criticism (as they imply huge costs at the expense of its inhabitants), bringing with them a dark side – an opportunity to increase international status at the expense of its citizens, and consequently damaging the image of the country (Castro 2018). Before the Games, Russia was criticized over the country's human rights record and an anti-gay propaganda law passed by Putin's government. Moreover, despite Russia's record medal, the Games were associated negatively with indications of a state-sponsored doping program. Also, the Olympics happened in the same period of the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent sanctions and Ukraine crisis. As Walker puts it: “Russia was indeed back, but not in the way Putin had intended” (Walker 2017). Indeed, Russia's Olympic Committee was banned from the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang and ordered to pay \$15m in costs after state-sponsored doping. It was the first time the International Olympic Committee has imposed a ban on a country competing under its own flag for doping (Ingle 2017). Later on, on February 28, 2018, the ban was lifted after no further negative drugs test in Pyeongchang (Kelner 2018). Nevertheless,

“despite months of bad press in the run-up to the Games over Russia’s human rights record and anti-gay propaganda law, when the competitions started the Olympics were a sporting success” (Grohmann 2014a) and Russia hoped to have advanced its prestige and attraction to other countries.

Finally, it is worth noting that Russia also hosted for the first time the Confederations Cup 2017 (June 17 – July 2), considered as a prelude to the 2018 FIFA World Cup. It was seized again as an opportunity to push back against the international perception of the country associated with hooliganism, racism, violation of labor rights and human rights, and corruption, hoping to present instead of that a gentler face to fans and tourists (Walker 2017).

Russia’s 2018 FIFA World Cup

Vladimir Putin’s personal involvement in the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics bid and strategy to host the 2018 World Cup prove that the “promotion of mass sports is a key goal and priority for Russia” (Putin 2018d). As referred above, because the Olympics in Sochi did not work as envisioned, the 2018 World Cup, arguably the biggest sporting event in the world, was viewed as another opportunity either to show off Russia’s great power status and to foster national pride. Indeed, bringing back the idea of “sport diplomacy as a ‘two-level game’, targeting international and domestic audiences simultaneously (Black & Peacock 2013, p. 537), the World Cup was designed to reinforce Putin’s domestic legitimacy and to create economic opportunities for its own domestic electorates, as well as to enhance Russia’s international image and to show a different side of the country.

On the one hand, as MacFarquhar (2018) puts it, Vladimir Putin “has tried to forge a national sense of unity and purpose atop nostalgia for Soviet achievements”, adding that “the Soviet sports machine also comes into play, sports being a noncontroversial arena where everyone in an ethnically mixed population can celebrate together” (MacFarquhar 2018). Indeed, the good team’s performance and progression at the World Cup gave the nation a reason to celebrate, and above all instilled a sense of national pride, even though the Russian team lost in the quarterfinals to Croatia. On the other hand, as Putin observes:

“Such large international forums as the World Cup are not only about a spectacle and thrill, but are also a good opportunity for millions of people to learn about other countries and their traditions as well as to make new friends (...) Our country is ready to host the 2018 FIFA World Cup and to provide everyone visiting Russia with a comfortable environment and positive emotions. Our goal is to make all guests (...) make them want to come back again”. (Putin 2018f).

At the same time, Russia wanted to defuse the idea that the West had isolated the country through international sanctions and diplomatic expulsions, demonstrat-

ing that it is still a member of the club of big powers (MacFarquhar 2018).

In order to guarantee that the hosting country is able to support all the requirements, huge investments are made. These investments begin long before the official decision to give the rights to host the event is made. Indeed, states compete to win bids for the events and candidates fight for every vote to be elected, built on strategies of pure soft power and hard work (Castro 2013a, p. 31). As with the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics bid process, Russia's soft power was already being demonstrated simply by winning the World Cup bidding process against other candidates, like Belgium and the Netherlands, England, and Spain and Portugal, confirming a successful strategy. In contrast to the Olympics where Vladimir Putin was personally involved in the bid process and was present at the official decision, he did not engage in shuttle diplomacy before the World Cup vote and did not attend FIFA's decision because of corruption allegations within FIFA (BBC News 2010). Black and Peacock argue that "although the lobbying of a country's highest-ranking politician may now be a virtual 'necessity' for winning the right to stage mega-events, it is no longer 'sufficient'", attesting this with the example of FIFA's choice of Russia over England despite the vigorous advocacy of the then Prime Minister David Cameron and Prince William (Black & Peacock 2013, p. 541).

Since Russia won the right to host the 2018 World Cup on December 2, 2010, another phase of the process began: preparation and organization throughout a period of seven years. Putin's government spent more than \$11 billion to host the 2018 World Cup (Tanas & Meyer 2018), including the construction of seven new stadiums and renovations to five other venues (BBC Sport 2018). It was the first time Russia hosted the FIFA World Cup, which took place from 14 June to 15 July 2018.

Although the World Cup is only one month, the benefits are supposed to be felt in the long-term. Ultimately, it is all about the legacy that big sporting events will bring to the host country: legacy for sports; legacy in infrastructure (new stadiums, hotels, roads, rail and bus systems, ports, airports), urban and social opportunities; legacy in creation of jobs and income; promotion of the country's image on a global scale, namely the potential to develop as a destination for business, trade and tourism (Castro 2013a, p. 31). The Russian President acknowledged the long-term strategy of using sports for political ends when he declared:

"Of course, we will continue to organize major international competitions in our country. We will also absolutely need to make good use of the venues that we spend vast amounts of money to build". (Putin 2018b).

To continue the analysis of Russia's World Cup, the article's position is that Vlad-

imir Putin, who began a fourth presidential term in May, put together a “dazzlingly well-organized” (Ronay 2018) and smooth World Cup, amid heightened tension with the West and despite a staggering economy, considering the fall of oil prices, and sanctions introduced since the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 (Council of the European Union 2018). Moreover, the announced diplomatic boycott related to the Salisbury attack (Harris 2018) and travel warnings did not hamper the success of the event. Also, fears of a politically-motivated counterattack against Western tourists, or possible terrorist attacks due to Russia’s involvement in Syria and Ukraine have not materialized.

In sum, the World Cup has happened with no major incidents off the field, no violence or hooliganism and many positive impressions of the country (Walker 2018b). Fans, athletes, and specialists who visited the country especially for the tournament have appreciated an “open, hospitable and friendly Russia” (Putin 2018a). According to the Russian President:

“not only the heads of state and government (...) but also, and most importantly, hundreds of thousands of football fans from all across the world, (...) saw with their own eyes the real Russia: open, friendly and modern. This is an obvious success and a breakthrough in what is known as public diplomacy”. (Putin 2018e).

Putin also added that “the myths and prejudices have been laid to rest”, and that “we will make sure that the people who have fallen in love with Russia enjoy as relaxed visa controls as possible, that they can continue to explore our country” (Putin 2018c).

It is in Russia’s interest to be known by citizens of other nations, to be known for positive things and not have its image distorted by others, often claiming of the West’s Russophobia and bad press. According to Walker (2018c), “for years, it has been easier for Russian officials to bray about Russophobia than to open up and show off a different side of the country”, adding that the World Cup “may be a temporary phenomenon, and it may not make the darker aspects fade away, but it is definitely to be welcomed” (2018c).

Also, FIFA President Gianni Infantino said that the World Cup changed

“the perception that the world has about Russia (...) the world, over four billion people, have been watching this World Cup, have been watching the beauties of this country, which is a country which is an incredibly, incredibly rich country, in terms of culture, in terms of history. And we have discovered it. The world has discovered it”. (cited in Putin 2018c).

In other words, it helped to present a clean and positive image, making Russia look less frightening and hostile, thanks mainly to the Russian people, who

presented a welcoming environment for all those in attendance, and to the relaxation of police detention and policing at protests during the World Cup (Walker 2018a).

To sum up, while the choice of Russia as the host has been challenged due to several controversial issues like discrimination, hooliganism, corruption, labor violations, and also Russia's involvement in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, in the end, the World Cup came out as an unquestionable public relations triumph for Vladimir Putin. As Rosenberg (2018) noted, "new stadiums, free train travel to venues and the absence of crowd violence has impressed visiting supporters. Russia has come across as friendly and hospitable: a stark contrast with the country's authoritarian image". Indeed, for one month, Russia got all the attention of the world for the good reasons and seized the opportunity of a very much beneficial international situation ever since 2014, on the eve of the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea. But as Nye (2013) observes, "attention depends on credibility". In other words, the successful hosting of the World Cup does not change the trend: in recent years democracy, human rights and freedom of speech in Russia have been under attack (Rosenberg 2018). As noted by Kolesnikov (2018b), "as a result of the World Cup, Russians will not become more free, the police will not stay friendly, and the regime will be no less authoritarian".

According to Human Rights Watch (2018), "the FIFA World Cup starting on June 14, 2018, will take place during the worst human rights crisis in Russia since the Soviet era". In a 44-page guide entitled "Russia: FIFA World Cup 2018 – Human Rights Guide for Reporters" summarized its concerns associated with Russia's preparations for and hosting of the World Cup, outlining broader human rights concerns in the country (Human Rights Watch 2018). Thus, sports and politics do mix, where the increased media attention is also used by activists and social movements to protest and raise awareness of political problems inside the hosting nations, such as human rights abuses and restrictions, censorship, labor violations related to the construction of the stadiums and sporting facilities, corruption, violence or repression (Castro 2018).

Finally, it should be noted that some analysts consider that the 2018 World Cup offers a distraction from the country's many social problems, especially for ordinary Russians, who have suffered economically in recent years. Hence, they are not convinced that the tournament "will increase Russia's international investment or trade, boost its tourism industry, or strengthen its people's commitment to physical fitness" (Zimbalist 2018). However, it is important to underline that cultural (and sports diplomacy) is part of a long-term strategy, whose success, benefits and effects are difficult to measure (US Department of State 2005, pp. 14-15). Arguably, the benefits and impact of Russia's strategy still remain to be seen.

Conclusion

One of the main aims of Russian foreign policy is to establish Moscow as one of the most important centers in the international arena. Simultaneously, it will continue to use its foreign policy to create in Russian society the image of the state as a great power. It has been argued in this article that sports and football were used by Russia as means to increase its soft power and to showcase a favorable image to both its foreign and domestic audiences, different than the one the West is used to. The analysis above shows how sports diplomacy is an important element of a long-term strategy to boost Russia's great power status, acknowledging the importance of sports and the hosting of sporting mega-events to soft power, and public and cultural diplomacy.

However, the analysis also underlines that Russia's ability to project its influence and "win hearts and minds" on a global scale is constrained, either by serious domestic problems and challenges, as by Russia's hard power image, which is why Russia still has a long way to go in terms of effectively implementing its soft power. In other words, Russia's soft power campaign is limited by the lack of coherence (and credibility) between the image that Russia aims to project and the country's actions on the ground (domestically and abroad). Thus, it will take more than the successful hosting of the World Cup to overcome the self-imposed limits on Russian soft power, such as lack of human rights (Human Rights Watch 2017), democracy, rule of law, lack of a dynamic civil society, corruption, among other problems, that undercut Russia's soft power in the West.

Hence, Russia's soft power strategy is not sufficient in the long run if the asymmetry between the rebranded image and its restrictive political system and actions endures (Castro 2018). That is to say that Russia's strategy has its limits and can back-fire, undermining its gains, explaining why it needs to be complemented with other soft-power tools in a long-term strategy if it wants to succeed.

In fact, both Russia and China "make the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power" (Nye 2013). Actually, Russian soft power instruments are primarily government-based and controlled, disregarding that many soft power resources "are outside the control of governments, and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audiences" (Nye 2004, p. 99). As Nye observes, "soft power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes" (2004, p. 99). Moreover, Russia, as China, lacks the many non-governmental organizations that generate much of America's soft power (Nye 2013). Finally, it is also worth mentioning that "sharp power threatens soft power" (Nye 2018a), entailing major consequences in Russia's ability to attract others.

Although difficult to measure and quantify the importance of soft power must

never be underestimated. In other words, despite the constraints, the value of the World Cup in altering many people's perceptions of the country should not be dismissed. Hence, the challenge ahead will be to convert the benefits of hosting the World Cup into long-term diplomatic gains. How that eventually plays out will, in large part, be determined by Russia's behavior and actions, both domestically and abroad. At the time of writing the Russian government is being severely criticized and Vladimir Putin's approval ratings are declining sharply over its recently announced pension reform plan, which will raise the retirement age to 65 for men and 63 for women in 2019 (Kolesnikov 2018c); Britain pressed the European Union to increase sanctions against Russia, saying it should stand "shoulder to shoulder" with the U.S., which hit Moscow with new economic restrictions this August (James 2018), and last, but not least, as investigations continue at Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there are suspicions of Russia's ongoing meddling in the upcoming U.S. elections (Holland & Mason 2018).

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Bio

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