The 2018 Football World Cup in Russia:
Cultural Impact & International Reception

Workshop & round table discussion, Durham University, 17 October 2018

Can a "Good World Cup" Improve Russia's Image? Insights from Journalists and Fans at Russia 2018

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The desire to host events like the FIFA World Cup is often explained by the perception that they are capable of providing dramatic transformations of international images of the host country and self-perceptions of its citizens. At the same time, difficulties and scandals inevitably surround hosting major sporting events due to the heighted media scrutiny and visibility. What I want to highlight is the role of individuals—both those hosting and attending these events such as journalists and fans—in informing and mediating images of the country.

Media event scholars demonstrated that narratives about the host country persist in news reporting as these events unfold. Even if blissfully ignoring issues from the realms of politics and economics concerning Russia, international media stories about the country centered on various crises in sports. These included doping, hooliganism, homophobia and racism of fans, as well as security concerns and lack of meaningful football achievements in the past decade. All of these amounted to a pessimistic outlook at what the tournament could achieve in terms of improving Russia's reputation worldwide.

My research at the World Cup this past summer focused on understanding the various issues connected to this event from the viewpoint of its attendees. I talked to several international and domestic journalists, sports media professionals, and regular fans to get their perspective on the power of this tournament to reshape Russia's image. What do their insights suggest to us?

For many international guests, the tournament was an opportunity to visit the country in person for the first time and discern first-hand whether all those concerns were true. One British journalist told me of their expectations before coming to Russia: "We were 'hyper-sensitive' to the political climate, which framed expectations quite a bit […] I think [the fans] shared some of the concerns around security. Around terrorism, to an extent. I think most people were worried about the breakdown in the political relations between the UK and Russia and wondering what impact that was having on how people are perceived. Asking if there'd be hostility towards us. To a lot of people, this was an unknown. I think people were curious [and] concerned about potential lack of political freedoms that might exist in Russia. Whether you can really express yourself, how authoritarian it is."

While there were thankfully no major incidents concerning security of those attending the tournament, it had an important impact on the way security forces were perceived for the duration of the event. Increased police presence posed the risk of reinforcing the stereotype of Russia being a "police state"; instead, it seemed to have shown an image of a modern, people-friendly security service, at least according to my interviewees. One Russian journalist reflected on this: "Important aspect, I think, is that police did a very good job at the World Cup […] I myself saw with what joy the policemen were helping the fans! […] Mexican [fans] were telling us, you have such a nice police! And we were responding: yes, very nice, we ourselves have never come across such a police force […] We saw police like we want them to be. I wish [they were] always like this!"

But it was of course not the police that foreigners came to experience during the tournament. It was a chance to meet "regular Russians". As one foreign correspondent reflected, "I think [the tournament] has been […] a shock to many journalists as well. Because they read shallow news, from maybe CNN, and that is their whole platform of knowledge. If you only read critical stories about Putin, how […] would you know how a society works?" Another foreign journalist "experienced" Russia through the translator who assisted the crew during the competition: "[The translator] was fantastic. From all my chats beforehand, I got to understand her character quite well. She was just super excited about the fact we were coming to Russia, and wanting to make sure we were going to get this 'Russian experience'. [… Through her, we got] little insights into how people think. I am not saying that she defines the entire nation but she was able to articulate so well [her views and opinions], and it was just really interesting. I think it would probably the thing I'd remember: for every government that is making decisions there'd be a woman like her who is just trying to get on with things. I'd try to see [the Russia-related news] through her eyes".

Finally, the World Cup was not just an opportunity for the world to meet the Russians, but also for the Russians to meet the world. I was surprised about the choice of words of my Russian-speaking interviewees, all of whom at some point referred to the World Cup with the word "*prazdnik*", which translates as holiday, festival, or celebration. A Russian journalist reflected on the World Cup: "This was exceptionally cool! This was a carnival. This was better than a carnival, because it was for real. There was absolutely no insincerity in this. It is very sad this is over […] I am a seasoned fan myself. I waited for this and understood what was coming. But even I did not realize that this would be a festival (*prazdnik*) of such a scale!"

Despite all these positive experiences, the question that still stands: can a World Cup have a 'real' effect on the image of the country? Internally, there was awareness among my interviewees this event could achieve little in terms of implications for international relations. Foreign journalists also agreed, questioning how long the positive effects could last realistically.

Both locals and foreigners showcased complex attitudes towards the power of this event to transform the image of the country. One of the foreign journalists reflected: “[Attending the World Cup] will make me think when we do a story about Russia. It will make me think about it slightly differently. I’m not saying it would necessarily change the output, but partly because I’m more informed, it would shape how I’d go about telling a story. I don’t know if that'd change what I'd actually say, or write, but I’d like to think I'll be better informed, which would be a good thing.” Another journalist commented: “I think, no, I hope, that this people-to-people contact that has been going on for the last weeks will leave marks, because I have to believe as a human that you can't [hate] people who [you had] direct contact with […], Russians or Westerners.”

However elusive outcomes of this contact may be to capture, the World Cup seemed to have affected the way both locals and foreigners think about Russia after being part of the event. A Russian journalist reflected: “I think the World Cup will change us. We just loved it so much. We loved that our city can be so happy. After all, there is so much dullness in life in Russia. But these green Mexican colours, red and white of Peru, or the sky-blue of Uruguay has painted our town.”

‘Russia isn’t a country of Putins!’ Reframing Russia through the World Cup 2018

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After the poisoning of Sergei and Julia Skripal in March 2018 relations between Russia and the ‘West’ were described as being ‘worse than during the cold war’. Russian diplomats were expelled from the UK, the US, and allied countries. Russia responded in kind, forcing 23 British diplomats to return home. In the British Parliament’s meeting of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee on the 21st March, one MP focused attention on the upcoming FIFA World Cup to be held in Russia that summer. His concern was that Vladimir Putin would use the World Cup ‘in the way Hitler used the 1936 Olympics’. In response, the then British foreign secretary Boris Johnson agreed, stating that the comparison was ‘completely right’.

Alongside the view that the World Cup would be a ‘PR exercise’ for the Putin regime, other concerns were rife in the British press in the run up to the tournament. Headlines warned of a ‘bloodbath’ as Russian hooligans were said to be seeking a rematch of the violent clashes that erupted in Marseille at the Euro 2016 tournament. Other concerns were raised about potential racist and homophobic behaviour from Russian fans. The England player Danny Rose even warned his family to stay home, saying ‘I don’t want them going out there because of racism and anything else that may happen’.

In this context, our research at the Open University set out to study how the Russian state funded international news broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today) would cover the World Cup. In particular, we were interested in asking; how does RT's coverage of the World Cup represent the Russian nation, culture, and people? And how do audiences interpret and respond to RT's coverage of the tournament?

In order to answer these questions we employed a variety of data sources and methods. Our study began by analysing the tweets published by RT during June and July 2018. During this time, RT published 7714 tweets, of which 17% (n=1132) were about the World Cup. This demonstrates that - unsurprisingly - the World Cup was a major media event for RT. In order to understand how exactly this was so, we then focused on another data source: articles published by RT on their World Cup specific website www.rt.com/fifa2018.

During June and July, RT published 776 articles on their World Cup website. We read these articles and thematically analysed them according to their content. Here, we identified four major themes. The first theme concerned articles about football, such as match reports and news about players and teams. This theme accounted for 48% of RT's World Cup coverage. The second theme we identified was about Russian culture. Here, stories about how Russia was a welcoming, vibrant place made up for 20% of RT's coverage. In addition to this, 19% of RT's articles were focused on fan experiences inside and outside of Russia. Finally, 14% of RT's World Cup coverage was reporting news about Putin, other world leaders, and explicitly challenging Western representations of Russia, as well as the lack of hooliganism and racism at the tournament.

These themes are important for several reasons. They reveal that RT attempted to counter negative expectations of Russia through positive representations. This involved a focus on football, where RT reported how the World Cup was a success on and off the pitch, as footballers, managers, and pundits were surprised and impressed by the Russian hosting of the World Cup. This positive representation was also explicit in RT's attention to Russian culture and fans. RT's articles served to portray Russia as a warm, welcoming, and open country. This was done through telling stories about Russian culture, and highlighting how fans from across the world were having fun in various Russian cities. At the same time, Putin was represented in a positive light and was shown to be friendly with other world leaders, footballers, and celebrities.

Ultimately, RT's representation of Russia attempted to normalise Russian people, culture, and politics, and represent Russia as similar to the 'west' and cooperative with other states, cultures, and peoples. This is in contrast to how RT traditionally frames the 'west' as being opposed to, and in conflict with Russia, where RT often portrays Russia as 'a rapidly advancing nation threatening to disturb the hegemonic balance of power'. Whilst RT has often framed Russia as a disruptive 'strongman' in global politics, their World Cup coverage instead depicts Russia as a welcoming and cooperative state. This perhaps suggests a shift in their communication strategy to one more akin with 'western' understandings of soft power, where states use co-option rather than coercion to make themselves and their actions attractive to others.

In order to understand how audiences responded to this reframing of Russia, we analysed social media interaction figures with the articles, as well as conducting a digital focus group with 50 participants on Facebook, and then following this up with more in-depth interviews. Our central findings here are that whilst articles about football received the most online interaction (n=281,843 likes, shares, retweets etc), articles on the topic of politics were more likely to gain, on average, over three times the amount of interaction (n=2515 compared with n=760). Indeed, the most popular article published on RT's World Cup site during this time was about Putin presenting the Croatian president with flowers. This demonstrates that RT was effective in utilising the World Cup to engage online audiences with content concerning Putin and the Russian government.

Our focus group research has revealed further dynamics about how RT's representation of Russia was interpreted by audiences. Three important issues were raised by participants. The first concerned how participants were expecting violence at the World Cup yet were pleasantly surprised at how there was none. One noted 'our culture is politically set up to see Russia as an adversary', yet RT's coverage was used to show that Russia can flout expectations – and is not necessarily an adversary. Here, RT's challenge of 'western' media representations made people reflect on how Russia is conventionally represented.

Second, participants felt that it was 'refreshing' to see 'ordinary Russians' having fun. One said 'for me this World Cup has been such a great opportunity for the world to see that Russia is of course full of loads of wonderful, happy people - just like everywhere else! Too often we portray the mindset of a country's leaders onto its innocent population - Russia isn't a country of Putins!' RT's focus on fan experience was key to a process of normalising Russia – as a people, a culture, and political entity – by emphasising that 1) Russia is just like you, and 2) Russia is open to the world. Despite the political extent of RT's coverage, and the focus on Putin, participants felt that they gained an insight into 'normal Russian's' and that the World Cup improved relations between the people of Russia and people elsewhere.

Third, the quality of the World Cup was noted as having a positive impact on Russian and 'western' relations. One participant suggested that 'the quality of the football is overcoming the divisiveness of politicians, and Russians have been welcoming… so far, it's been a good World Cup for Russia.' The success of the tournament, the excitement of the games, and the success of the Russian team were all deemed to be important in making Russia look good. The coverage of the tournament itself therefore perhaps had more impact than the other content concerning politics, Putin and culture. Or as our participants put it, 'once a ball was kicked all the worries fell away' and 'it was all about the football'.

In conclusion, our research has found that RT's representation of Russia throughout the World Cup is at odds with traditional forms of Russian soft power, which is often founded on disinformation, reliant on the threat of hard power, and centred around nationalism, patriotism, and the idea of Russian uniqueness. RT's World Cup coverage marks a shift in this, and shows Russia as welcoming, friendly, and open to 'westerners' and the world at large. Our research participants stated that RT was 'relentlessly cheery' and 'positive' throughout the World Cup, but overall they thought it was fair and accurate. Subsequently, our research suggests that RT's World Cup coverage created a soft power appeal in firstly, portraying the experience of the World Cup without any trouble, flouting expectations of violence, hooliganism, and racism. Secondly, in RT's focus on ordinary Russians and other fans having fun, something that contributed to a normalisation of Russian culture, people, and politics. And finally, through the success of the tournament on the pitch, where it seems that football fandom trumps politics.

This research was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and is part of the 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War"?' project exploring RT and its audiences. More information can be found at www.reframingrussia.com

From Crumbling Concrete to Modern Arenas – Russian Football before and after the 2018 World Cup

Andy **Potts**, sports journalist

The 2010 announcement that Russia would host the 2018 FIFA World Cup prompted a transformation in Russian football. The Russian bid relied on a host of newly-built stadia; when Sepp Blatter unveiled the host nation, only one of the proposed arenas existed and that was scheduled for a complete renovation.

Before the World Cup

Most Russian teams played in Soviet-era concrete bowls in front of sparse crowds. Spectator facilities were often poor, the arenas were in a poor state of repair and fans were separated from the action by athletics tracks. In addition, football crowds had a bad reputation. Fan violence – and, more importantly, the fear of fan violence – kept attendances low. In Moscow, for many residents, encounters with football fans meant a scary glimpse of a brawl in a metro station on the days when Spartak played CSKA; the police presence in and around stadia was prominent and intimidating. There was a sense that going to the stadium to watch a game was an active for the 'neadekvatny', the so-called inadequates, a catch-all term for an ill-defined, crude underclass in Russian society. After visiting my first game, I unwisely mentioned my Sunday afternoon entertainment in my Russian language class: teacher Irina Petrovna turned pale, warned me and my fellow students against going to such events and decided that 'opasno' (dangerous) might be the word for the day. This was not an isolated reaction; people with jobs, with education, were not expected to attend football stadia.

That was a huge change from the glory days. Clubs like Dynamo Moscow, multiple Soviet champions, once formed part of the USSR's soft power initiatives. Dynamo's post-war tours to Britain and elsewhere sought to unite the two sides of the Iron Curtain on the football field, while also providing an opportunity to showcase the physical prowess of a collectivised nation. By the time I first visited Dynamo in 2006, the famous 1950s 'Football Song' that claimed 'All Moscow hurries to Dynamo, regardless of the rain' was a now cruel joke: a moribund team battling against relegation slashed ticket prices to as little as 30 roubles (50p at the exchange of the day) and struggled to get 10,000 fans through the gates. Across town, title chasing Spartak also saw its crowds stagnate around the 10,000 mark. Russian sports fans were more enthusiastic about the country's new wave of tennis champions; football lovers preferred to get their fix watching Europe's top clubs on television.

Changing facilities, changing attitudes

Like English football in the aftermath of the Hillsborough tragedy, the rehabilitation of Russian football began with new infrastructure. The new World Cup arenas became attractions in themselves. A 2015 European Championship qualifier between Russia and Sweden did not have the ingredients of a sell-out: Russia was in dreadful form and many pundits expected a defeat that would end any hopes of reaching the 2016 finals in France. The Swedes were not a glamour opponent on the level of Germany, Spain or the South American giants. And yet, the 42,000-capacity stadium was full.

The difference came from two things: enhanced facilities and a growing distance between the football authorities and the Ultras. The facilities were immediately obvious. The new Spartak arena, opened in 2014, boasted a close-up view of the action, while European-style concourses offered much improved food and drink options. There was even table football available, branded in Spartak colours. This felt like an attempt to actually attract people to the game. Irina Petrovna wasn't there, but various colleagues of mine, past and present, posted their photos on to Facebook after the game. Football was becoming fashionable again.

After the championship – rising attendances despite old problems

The World Cup itself was a success. Russia performed better than expected on the field and scored a major triumph off it. There were few reports of trouble and no serious outbreaks of violence. Visitors were left with a positive impression of Russia. To some extent this was no surprise. Russia's recent experience of hosting major events has been characterised by effective, enthusiastic, multi-lingual volunteers eager to ensure that visitors went away from the 2014 Winter Olympics, the 2015 FINA World Aquatic Sports Championship or the 2016 IIHF World Ice Hockey Championship with a good impression of Sochi, Kazan, Moscow or St. Petersburg.

What has been more impressive are the increased attendances at Russian football matches. There is evidence that the new arenas are playing a role in attracting more fans. Better quality facilities encourage people to feel safer attending games, dispelling the belief that Russia's domestic championship is a refuge for hooligans. In the Russian Premier League, the average attendance in the 2018-19 season so far is 17,695 from 112 games. That's up from the previous season's average of 13,971 and a big improvement on the 10-12,000 average that was commonplace in the seasons prior to the World Cup preparations. Much of the increase comes from the grounds used at the World Cup. In comparison with the 2006 season, when I first started watching Russian football, Zenit's crowds have grown from 21,887 to 50,661. Spartak's have doubled from 17,215 to 32,293 despite poor form in the early stages of this season. Krylya Sovietov Samara improved from 15,000 to 22,595. However, in Kazan there is a warning that this process can stall. Rubin's crowds have barely changed: 13,480 in 2006, 13,637 this season. This may be due to the uninspiring football on display (Rubin's eight home games have produced just 13 goals, even if the home team managed four wins and three draws so far) and may also reflect that the novelty has worn off. Built for the 2013 Universiade, the Kazan Arena was the first of Russia's World Cup new-builds to stage a football match.

The effect is not limited to the Premier League. In the National League, Russia's second tier, average attendances have almost doubled from last season. This sprawling competition has huge disadvantages in attracting fans: the distances are vast, with a team in Kaliningrad facing a trip to Vladivostok, 6,300 miles away on the Pacific coast. Fixture schedules are unpredictable, with games played at random intervals rather than each weekend. Media coverage is limited: the main national sports newspapers, Sovietsky Sport and Sport Express, rarely report on this in any detail so casual fans are unlikely to be aware of fixtures until after the event.

Despite these challenges, the average for the current season is up to 4,668 from 230 games played to date. That's up from the 2,425 average at last season's 340 games, and the increase is largely due to the increased crowds in Volgograd, plus the benefits of the other World Cup arenas in Kaliningrad, Sochi, Saransk and Nizhny Novgorod.

However, despite the evidence of increased attendances – reinforcing the perception that interest in football is once again socially acceptable and perhaps even socially advisable – problems still exist. Hooliganism hasn't gone away: the Russian Cup tie between Torpedo Moscow and Dynamo Moscow in September was disrupted by clashes between rival fans, much like a similar fixture in 2012 at the Streltsov Stadium.

Then there was the notorious fracas that saw Russian internationals Alexander Kokorin and Pavel Mamayev assault a civil servant in a Moscow cafe in early October. At first sight, this was a repeat of the old story – football and violence, entitlement and hooliganism. However, there was a very different tone to the official responses. If in Marseilles, Russia's players and football authorities stopped short of explicitly condemning rioting fans in 2016, this incident drew unequivocal statements. "We believe that those responsible should be punished in the most severe way. There is no place for hooligans in football," read a Russian Premier League Statement. Kokorin's club, Zenit, spoke of 'disgust, indignation and … shame'; FC Krasnodar, Mamayev's team, pledged to do 'everything possible' to terminate the midfielder's contract. This new hard line offers hope that changing attitudes towards football in Russia may be allowed to nurture a new-look, inclusive version of the world's most popular game.

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