Sports and its mega events have become a tool of government policy in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Sports policy is an essential part of strategies that borrow heavily from the Soviet past. A commentary by Miriam Kosmehl and Richard Arnold.

Sport and major sporting events like the Olympics and the Soccer World Cup provide economic stimulus, but they also promote nationalism. Since Putin's second term as President in 2004–2008, the Russian Federation has sought – and won – the right to host international sporting events collectively known as Sporting Mega Events (SMEs): from European Champions League soccer games and the Universiade – the student world games and second largest event after the Olympics – to the Olympics themselves and, of course, the Soccer World Cup.

Many initially greeted these SMEs on Russian soil as welcome signs of Russia's integration into the world order, although subsequent events like the annexation of Crimea cast doubt on the validity of such a rationale. These
conflicting motivations can be reconciled when we consider how holding international sporting events boosts nationalism and, in the case of Russia, how both the events and a Cold War and Soviet-style rivalry showed Russia to be rising from its knees.

**Major event lends status**

Perhaps the main way in which sport can contribute to a people's collective self-regard is through demonstrating a country's status in the world. To borrow a sporting metaphor, only Premier League countries are eligible to host SMEs, so doing so is an implicit recognition of a country's esteem.

Surveys from the respected **Levada Center** demonstrate that in October 2014, 33 percent of Russian respondents listed "sporting achievements" as the third reason for "pride in Russia" right after "natural treasures" and "the military" – a number that decreased to 24 percent by April 2017. This is the inverse of pride in military might, which was 24 percent (2014) and 37 percent (2017) respectively. A survey from the **Russian Sociological Organisation** demonstrates that Russian students are also very proud that their country is hosting the World Cup.

When the USSR ceased to exist, many Russians said they missed the loss of their nation's status as a great power (*derzhava*) more than anything else. If popular sports, in the words of George Orwell, are "war minus the shooting," then proving one's country to be a "sporting *derzhava*" through an SME is a mighty figurative shell. As a source of status, SMEs slake the thirst for recognition of Russian nationalism.

**Strong president, strong nation**

Alongside the narrative of Russia "rising from her knees" go more conventional benefits of hosting an SME. SMEs increase a country's "soft power" in several ways, including the opportunity to overturn previous negative stereotypes and advertise the country as a tourist destination. Germany used the opportunity of the 2006 World Cup particularly well, with German citizens and visitors alike developing a new relation to the black-red-gold colors of the German flag, and people still cherish vivid memories of the "German summer fairy tale."

Along with generating international "soft power," SMEs also increase the attractiveness of a country domestically. In Russia, SMEs harness the diffuse support of the population to demonstrate, in Putin's words about Sochi, "the power and might of our country, our desire to win" (quoted by a Russian observer in 2014). Accruing external soft power benefits did indeed initially appear to be the aspiration of the Russian government in holding the Sochi
Winter Olympics – Putin and Lavrov openly discussed the idea of turning Sochi into an international sporting venue for wealthy Russians and visitors from Europe –, but such benefits were undermined by events in Ukraine. Still, internal soft power benefits remain, and there is every reason to think the coming festival of football will have similar effects.

Which leads to the third way in which the hosting of such sporting events can boost the self-image of the nation: by associating the country's leaders with strength and projecting a healthful image to the population. President Putin is indeed portrayed as a man of action associated with sporting images, making much of his judo prowess, love of horseback riding, swimming ability, and ice hockey skills – to name but a few. In this, Putin resembles no other leader so much as Mussolini, who was often photographed shirtless performing manly activities, and who understood the power of sport in connecting with the masses. Mussolini was in power when Italy hosted the 1934 World Cup and took personal responsibility for a pep talk the night before the final against Czechoslovakia in Rome. When Italy won the World Cup, it naturally reflected well on him. Association with sport increases the cult of personality around Putin, the personification of the virile Russian man, an emblem of the nation's self-confidence ostensibly borne of inner strength.

Investment with purpose

As the 2018 World Cup approaches, some will undoubtedly question its costs and ask whether the event is worth it. In light of Russia's current estrangement from the global community – the sanctions imposed by many countries and by Russia in return, the claims of interference in Western elections, and the reciprocal accusations regarding the Skripal poisoning in the UK – the hope of using a football tournament to integrate into the world community may seem like either a long shot or a huge waste of money.

However, such criticisms may miss the crucial incentive Russia has in making use of SMEs: boosting nationalism to divert attention from its own structural problems and propping up a regime facing economic stagnation and a lack of enthusiasm for another six years of the Putin presidency.

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