# A silver medal project: the partial success of Russia's soft power in Sochi 2014

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# A silver medal project: the partial success of Russia's soft power in Sochi 2014

*Sven Daniel Wolfe*

This paper argues that the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, represented a soft power attempt to introduce a new conception of "Russian-ness" to both domestic and international audiences. Pre- and post-event attitudes regarding Russia were captured at the international, domestic, and local levels from popular opinion surveys, international and domestic mass media and social networks, interviews, and participant observation. The paper concludes that while the international aspirations failed, the domestic population – after some notable problems – accepted this new sense of Russian-ness. Though the Sochi Olympics did not change international perceptions, the games were instrumental in consolidating domestic power.

**Keywords:** Russia; Olympics; mega-events; soft power; Sochi 2014

## Introduction: why hold the Olympics in Sochi?

Scholars acknowledge a wide array of reasons why nations and cities compete to host mega-events, from economic stimulus and urban development to reframing national and international perceptions of the host (Cornelissen 2010; Essex and Chalkley 1998; Hiller 2000; Horne and Manzenreiter 2006; Misener and Mason 2008; Preuss and Alfs 2011). Although Russian elites had many economic, developmental, and geo- political reasons for hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics, this paper argues that one of the primary goals was a desire to introduce a new conception of what Russia is – a sense of "Russian-ness" – both to the domestic population and to the international community. For the international audience, this meant replacing Cold War-era mistrust with the idea of modern Russia as a tourist destination, a dependable trading partner, and an open (but independent) country. Domestically, in an environment of relative political vulnerability for the Russian president, it meant promoting a unified, state-sanctioned Russian-ness in order to consolidate power.

This paper argues that hosting the Olympic mega-event was an attempt to eliminate the numerous competing notions of Russian-ness that had been spawned by the Soviet collapse. It examines the efforts to introduce a new sense of Russian-ness across three groups: the international (reduced to the USA, due to the outsize role played by the USA in the Russian political and social imagination), the national (consisting of the domestic Russian population, in this paper largely drawn from urban centres), and the local (comprised of the people in Sochi and environs who experienced the Olympic project firsthand). Measuring attitudes within these groups both before and after the event, this paper evaluates the

attempts to reframe perceptions of Russia abroad while introducing a new sense Russian-ness to the domestic population.

## Soft power and the post-Soviet experience

In this paper the term Russian-ness refers to the perception of what Russia is (both abroad and in Russia), while domestically it also encompasses a Russian individual's sense of self in context of the larger group, community, and nation. In claiming that the 2014 Winter Olympics were used to introduce a new sense of Russian-ness, this paper begins from the idea that mega-events affect not just the urban and natural environments, but also the social world (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006). Indeed, mega-events commonly are used as a tool for identity-building, international signalling, and soft power politics (Black and van der Westhuizen 2004; Coaffee 2010; Cornelissen 2010; Grix 2012). Soft power, in this usage, refers to the concept that a state can shape the preferences of other states through attraction instead of coercion (Nye 2008, 2005). At the intersection of politics and sport, scholars have investigated how states employ the soft power of mega-events to improve the image of the nation abroad, as well as to announce an improved stature on the international stage (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2014a, 2014b; Grix and Houlihan 2014; Grix and Lee 2013).

Mega-events come with intense worldwide media attention that is often instrumentalized to convey symbolic meaning. Particularly during the ritualized spectacles of the opening and closing ceremonies, this can mean establishing stature in the inter- national order and creating or displaying shared conceptions of nationhood or self (Black 2008; French and Disher 1997; MacAloon 1984; Qing et al. 2010).

Perhaps the most famous example of the successful use of a mega-event as a catalyst for change (both urban and perceptual) is the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, which saw the transformation of a run-down industrial coastline into a world-class tourist destination (Essex and Chalkley 1998; Moragas 1995). More recently, South Africa attempted to use the 2010 FIFA Men's Football World Cup to fast-track its urban development, reduce poverty, and introduce a new conception of South Africa both to the domestic population and to the world community (Bass, Pillay and Tomlinson 2009). Though the goals of mega-event planners often fall short, evidence from Olympics in Vancouver 2010 and London 2012 shows that the festival atmosphere of hosting creates positive psycho-social effects that at least temporarily outshine the problems (Hiller and Wanner 2014). While all these elements were at play in the Sochi Olympics, this paper foregrounds the psychosocial effects and the attempts to introduce new conceptions of Russian-ness.

The paper contends that Russian-ness has been contested and in flux since

the fall of the Soviet Union. Countless examples exist of post-collapse Russians, on both individual and collective levels, searching for a new sense of Russian-ness: from president Yeltsin launching a national contest to define a new "Russian idea" (Gordon 1998; Smith 2002, 158), to foreign minister Kozyrev asking former US president Nixon for help in defining the Russian national interest (Mankoff 2009, 39), to the loss of stability and social unity among the population at large (Gessen 2013, 13; OECD 2001). Indeed, the search for Russian-ness has been a dominant feature of post- Soviet life. In the upheavals that followed the Soviet collapse – a trauma that decimated the life savings of millions, reversed decades of ideological rigidity, and reduced the nation's geographical boundaries and international status (Ushakin 2009) – is it any wonder that people would reflect confusion in their sense of Russian- ness? Soon, numerous overlapping, competing, and often contradictory ideas arose about what it means to be Russian in a post-Soviet world. Among these were the notions of Russia as a liberal democracy in the European style, and Russia as an independent, major world power. Other conceptions included ingredients of Soviet nostalgia, Tsarist-era cultural discovery, Orthodox Christian revival, and pre-Christian folk tradition.

Even as the nation was preparing to host the Winter Olympics, and had enjoyed relative political stability and increasing prosperity for over a decade, public discussions and debate on Russian-ness continued (Prokhanov 2013). Many of these competing ideas came to a head in the winter of 2011–2012 when Russians took to the streets for the first mass protests since the early 1990s, prompted by Vladimir Putin's return for a third Presidential term (Oates and Lokot 2013; Radchenko, Pisarevskaya, and Ksenofontova 2012). The authorities crushed the mass protests with violence, imprisonment, and a campaign of intimidation, including show trials (Amnesty Inter- national 2014; Shevtsova and Samokysh 2012; Walker 2013). Indeed, much of president Putin's latest term in office has been dedicated to repressing the discontent and dissent that burst to the surface when he announced his return to the presidency (Balcer 2012). The Russian government aims to prevent what they call destabilization of the state, while the fractured opposition agitates for legal and electoral reforms and what they call a more authentic democracy. This represents a conflict between two broadly competing ideas of Russian-ness.

In the context of the ambiguous and often contradictory senses of Russian-ness, this paper pursues the idea that the 2014 Winter Olympics presented an opportunity for the state to introduce a single, stable conception of Russian-ness to the domestic population and the international community. Using the soft power vehicle of the world's most prestigious mega-event, the government wished to demonstrate that, as shown in a slogan emblazoned by the entrance to the coastal cluster of Olympic venues in Sochi, modern Russia is "Great, New, Open." For the international audience, this meant presenting Russia not only as a great power

whose position must be taken into consideration on the world stage, but also as a dependable trading partner and desirable tourist destination. For the domestic population, this meant propagating a unified, stable sense of Russian-ness constructed from selected portions of pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian cultural history. In the wake of the 2011– 2012 protests, then, Russian political elites wished to replace the chaos of competing senses of Russian-ness with the dependable unity of a single state-produced Russian-ness.[1] The mega-event was a tool to stabilize the country under a wave of sport-oriented patriotism while simultaneously attempting to reframe perceptions of Russia abroad. On 17 January 2014, president Vladimir Putin laid out the international scope of the vision for the Olympics in an interview with foreign journalists:

> I would very much like the participants, fans, journalists, and all those who will watch the Olympics on television and follow through the media to see a new Russia, to see its face and its possibilities, to take a fresh and unbiased look. And I believe that this will happen, that a good, positive result will help grow relations between Russia and its partners throughout the world. (Putin 2014a)

Later, Mr Putin conveyed the national importance of hosting the games, framing the effort in shared sacrifice, national unity, and historical duty:

> I would like to thank the residents [of Sochi], who have bravely and patiently shouldered a public burden. The project has been completed successfully and a colossal amount of work has been done ... Not everything, but much of what was done now actually was planned back in the late 1980s, in the Soviet Union. But even such a large country – its economy and geographic area were 40% larger – even the Soviet Union wasn't able to complete this project ... It is especially pleasant for me to note that we had complete nationwide consensus for holding these games. Now, dear athletes, I would like to speak to you. We have hundreds, thousands, millions of supporters watching your every performance. We are counting on you and we are placing our hopes in you. (Putin 2014b, 2014c)

In the following sections, this paper will consider whether the new Russian-ness took hold by examining opinions towards Russia both before and after the Olympic mega-event, in the international, national, and local populations.

## Methods

To make sense of the Russian mega-event project, this paper synthesizes a picture of public opinion in the periods before and after the Olympics. On the international level, Russian elites in large part measure themselves and their development against the yardstick of the USA. In this way, the USA plays the role of the Other in the formation of Russian-ness, particularly due to the legacy of their Cold War-era competition (Eriksen 1995; Johnson and Coleman 2012). As such, this paper limits the analysis of public opinion at the international level to

the USA. To approximate American public opinion, data were collected from five of the top circulating newspapers in the USA: the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Washington Post, all of which are in the top 10 in terms of audience reach (Pew 2013). Further, following the growth of digital native news organizations and their increasing reach into the international news market, this paper also sourced articles from The Huffington Post and Buzzfeed, both leaders in online content (|Pew 2014c, 2014a). Finally, over 4000 individual tweets were collected from Twitter, the world's dominant microblogging service. Tweets were collected twice daily during February 2014, a date range that captures the week before the Sochi Olympics and the denouement after the closing ceremonies. Tweets were chosen by searching for #Sochi, #Russia, and #Olympic as well as by following notable twitter accounts, such as the official twitter feeds for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) (American broadcaster of the games), the International Olympic Committee, and any Sochi or Olympic-related feeds or hashtags that appeared on Twitter's curated "trending" list.

For other media sources, the time period for data collection was limited to the nine months surrounding the Olympics: six months preceding the event and three months following. As the games occurred in February 2014, this paper collected 780 articles through weekly searches of media sources from August 2013 through May 2014, based on the terms: Sochi*, Russia*, and Olympic*. Gallup and Pew public opinion polls begin from 2007, when the games were awarded to Russia.

On the national level, this paper used the top circulating Russian newspapers: Kommersant, Izvestiya, Vedomosti, Rossiskaya Gazeta, and Novaya Gazeta (Medialogia 2015). These papers range from independent publications to mouthpieces for the state. Further, data were sourced from Russia's leading social networking site, vkontakte.ru. Searches were conducted in Russian but terms were identical to the English language search, resulting in 585 news articles and over 2600 posts from vkontakte. Polling data were taken from Levada Center, a well-respected independent Russian polling and sociological research company, as well as VTsIOM, Russia's oldest opinion research firm. Both organizations provide their data to the public free of charge. Applicable polls from Gallup and Pew in the chosen date range were included as well.

Finally, 86 semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and online in six Russian cities: Moscow (7), St. Petersburg (22), Kazan (4), Vladivostok (5), Pskov (6), and Sochi (42). Moscow and St. Petersburg are Russia's two main urban centres, the most populous cities in the country. Pskov is a small city of 200,000 near the Estonian border, Kazan has a population of over a million and is the former host of a smaller profile mega-event in 2013, and

Vladivostok is a small city distant from the capital whose nearest international neighbours are China and North Korea. These cities were chosen to glean a rough sample of interview participants from the breadth of Russia, and from cities of different size. In each city, interview participants were selected by approaching spectators at the countrywide Olympic torch relay, at public parks, bars, cafes, and universities. Online participants were found on vkontakte.ru by searching for public profiles and open groups in the chosen cities. Inter- views ranged in length from 15 minutes to 2 hours. They were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analysed for common themes. The quotations chosen for this paper were selected because of their overall representativeness among the inter- view data. However, it is understood that this is not a random sampling but rather an effort to add depth and colour to the polling data.

On the local level in Sochi, interviews and participant observation occurred at the two clusters of Olympic venues and in the string of small villages between them. Inter- view participants were approached either at Olympic events, in public squares or parks, or located through established personal networks. The 42 Sochi interviews were then combined with regional polling by Levada, VTsIOM, and Gallup, as well as Müller's survey on popular perception in Sochi (Müller 2012).

Each data collection method illuminated an aspect of the mega-event project, but the methods also have limitations. For instance, surveys were used to provide statistically valid opinion sampling from 2007 to 2014. This was useful for providing historical context and an overall picture of public thought. At the same time, surveys are subject to framing biases and may not actually reflect true public opinion. Further- more, only Müller's survey addresses Sochi specifically (the other surveys are either regional or national), but this survey does not cover the period during or after the games. Both traditional and new media were brought in to augment this survey data, choosing the highest impact newspapers and online sources in Russia and the USA. However, this choice introduces potential problems of journalistic independence, as the publications may censor or self-censor due to business or political interests. To provide a more micro-level view, the project then added social media sites Twitter and vkontakte, both of which dominate their respective sectors. The drawback here involves the anonymity inherent in much of the Internet, so it is not always possible to verify claims. Finally, participant observation and interviews gave the research a qualitative depth and emotion that cannot be captured by other means. However, although the interviews were conducted in Russian and most interview participants acted comfortably with the researcher, there is the possibility of potential reluctance to give truthful opinions to a foreigner. Further, the researcher's positionality colours the interpretation of observations, and indeed influences the very choices of what to observe. For these reasons, the opinions captured here at all levels should be considered a synthesis or approximation of public opinion, and not necessarily a

true representation.

At the conclusion of data collection, the data sets were analysed and sorted into categories according to theme. When themes intersected across different datasets, this was considered a significant event and the theme was marked. Finally, the significant themes were ranked according to frequency, with the highest frequency themes appearing in this paper.

## International (American)

> Russia's anti-gay law casts a shadow over Sochi's 2014 Olympics. ("Russia's Anti-Gay Law" 2013)

In the pre-event period, much of the international discourse focused on potential problems with the Olympic preparations or on wider political issues. Coverage ranged from Russia's controversial anti-homosexual propaganda law to the topics of greed, waste, and cronyism. Suicide bombings in Volgograd during the New Years holidays just prior to the games reinvigorated security concerns and fears of terrorist activity during the event. As the opening ceremony drew nearer, international attention discussed the remaining incomplete construction, police oppression of dissent, Sochi's stray dog population, and the perceived backwardness of Russian culture in comparison to American norms. Talk of boycotting the games was common:

> Given Russia's adoption of draconian laws targeting the L.G.B.T. community, the best course of action is to tune out the Games and switch to another network or cable station. ("When Should Countries Boycott the Olympics?" 2014b)

Pew Research polls show that in the USA, public opinion about Russia has been on a steep downward track since 2010 and is now at its lowest level in two decades (Pew 2014b). In September 2013, Gallup noted that a majority of Americans viewed Russia as unfriendly or an enemy for the first time since at least 2000, marking a drastic change even from June of the same year (Gallup 2013). American media commonly portrayed Russia as dangerous and backwards, and the Olympics as a pet project of their autocratic, neo-Soviet president:

> The megaproject has returned – another Soviet legacy pursued by the singular will of Vladimir Putin. ("Putin's Olympic" 2014a)

Clearly, in the context of numerous documented cases of violations of legal, environmental, and human rights norms, reporting about problems in the run-up to the games was both accurate and necessary journalism. However, in other instances, the narratives seemed overwhelmingly negative, even to the point of hysteria and hyperbole. In some cases, these negative storylines dominated international attention even with outright fabrications. A good example of this

phenomenon occurred on Twitter, which lacks the fact-checking apparatus of a standard media outlet. As the games got underway, people began sharing pictures of humorous or dangerous infra- structure problems in Sochi, marked with the #sochiproblems and #sochifails hash- tags. Almost immediately, these hashtags began trending site-wide and growing exponentially popular; the new novelty Twitter account @sochiproblems gained 340,000 followers within a week after the opening ceremony. However, many of the #sochiproblems photos were actually taken well before the Olympics in a number of Central European countries and did not accurately represent the current situation in Sochi. Nevertheless this trend spread from Twitter and received coverage in major media outlets around the USA:

> Photographic proof that Sochi is a godforsaken hellscape right now. ("Photographic Proof" 2014)

Near the end of the games, the crisis in Ukraine bubbled to the surface. After the closing ceremonies, the crisis in Kiev flared into open conflict and polarized the relationship between Russia and the West. The Ukrainian conflict overrode the mega-event in Sochi, and the spectre of a new Cold War destroyed any potential soft power gains for Russia among the international community. By March 2014, a record 68% of Americans viewed Russia as unfriendly or an enemy (Gallup 2014a).

For the international community, then, the pre-event period was marked by a tone of derision, mockery, and fear of a resurgent neo-Soviet foe, while the post-event period was dominated by hard power concerns in Ukraine. Hosting the Winter Olympics failed to convince the USA to see Russia in a new light.

**National**

> Maybe we will win some medals, but I don't think the Olympics are worth the money. We have many other needs to take care of first. We have other priorities. (Volodya,[2] pre-event)

On the domestic level, the introduction of a new sense of Russian-ness enjoyed more success despite people's legitimate concerns about corruption and the misuse of public funds. In the run-up to the Olympics, the independent Levada Center con- ducted a series of surveys to determine Russian opinions regarding the games. Seven months before the opening, national opinion was split evenly on whether Russia should invest so seriously in image projects like the Winter Olympics or the 2018 World Cup, though 62% said they were proud of hosting mega-events (Levada Center 2013). This speaks to a pervasive division in society about the overall value of the games in the context of other spending priorities; at the same time, that a majority nevertheless expressed pride at hosting shows not

only the symbolic power of the Olympic brand, but also how far removed these people were from the developments in Sochi:

> I am proud that the Olympics will be in Russia. We never had the Winter Olympics before, can you imagine? (Sasha, pre-event)

On the eve of the games, Levada asked about the motivations for Russia hosting. There was no national consensus: a majority (38%) replied that the primary reason for hosting the Olympics was to "scam enormous amounts from the federal budget", while 23% thought it important and honorable for a great country to hold the games. 17% thought it beneficial to the image of president Putin and other national leaders, and 15% thought that hosting was a good strategy to attract tourists. (Levada Center 2014)

Another pre-event poll revealed that 62% of Russians believe that mega-events bring positive benefits to the host city, and 60% stated that mega-events have a positive effect on the development of the host country (VTsIOM 2014b). But when asked why Russia had spent more on Olympic preparations than any nation in history, 47% responded that the majority of the funds had been stolen outright, and 34% blamed the greed of construction companies involved in the project. Finally, 62% of respondents doubted that the businessmen and government officials who permitted or participated in malfeasance would be brought to justice. And yet, in the same poll, 53% thought that Russia "did the right thing" in hosting the Sochi Olympics, against 26% who disagreed (Levada Center 2014). Semi-structured interviews buttress these findings, revealing that many people felt pride at Russia hosting but still were very much aware of problems with corruption and the lack of accountability:

> There is too much corruption in our country. They will steal everything and build crap with the crumbs that are left. (Grisha, pre-event)

National media discourse during the pre-event period displayed a split between state-run and independent media. State media tended to feature more uplifting stories about the preparations for the Olympics, particularly the countrywide relay which brought the Olympic torch to the bottom of Lake Baikal and into orbit on the International Space Station. National television was awash with personal inter- views and biographies of famous athletes, and the "One Nation – One Team" campaign covered billboards across the nation. When state media covered the notorious delays and cost overruns in construction, they either minimized the size of the problems, or showed president Putin coming to Sochi, removing incompetent officials and promising to take a firmer stance in the preparations. For instance, national television broadcast Putin publicly sacking two high-ranking officials over the two-year delay and four-fold increase in the cost of the ski jump complex in Krasnaya Polyana. This news was repeated across

the country by traditional and online media (Gazeta 2013; Rbc.ru 2013). Just one month before the event, president Putin again publicly fired someone for the delays:

> I think the Olympics are just another excuse for shameless bandits to rob the country. (Irina, pre-event)

Independent media and opposition groups on social networking sites tended to be more critical of the Olympic preparations, discussing corruption, environmental damage, and the new limitations on dissent. Independent journalists and anti-corruption bloggers produced detailed accounts of the theft occurring under the nation's nose, publishing investigations of the network of cronyism and corruption that surrounded the Olympic construction project and the president himself (Anti-Corruption Foundation 2014).

Once the games began, however, a strange shift occurred: as the opening ceremonies got underway, many Russians – even those with avowed pro-Western, anti- Putin views – took umbrage at what they considered biased, overly negative coverage from the West (Ioffe 2014). They called this "Western zloradstvo" or, literally, evil-revelling. In the face of external negative pressure from the West, the Olympics trans- formed into a rallying point for the country, and the games became a point of pride. This does not mean the disappearance of disagreement and dissent: soon, opposition Russians resumed discussing corruption, ecological damage, local evictions, and the danger of unchecked presidential power. But for a time, the dominant narrative became one of national pride, togetherness, and shared victory, at least for the moment:

> The amount of money shocked me. I read that it was the most expensive Olympics in history. But at least they built something with it, instead of going to war like what's hap- pening now. (Irina, post-event)

Post-event, polls showed that a vast majority of the Russian population (81%) fol- lowed the Olympics, with majorities reporting pride at watching their national teams compete, and of "delight at the performance of Russia's athletes". 93% agreed that Russia staged a worthy games (VTsIOM 2014a):

> In Russia we have more important things to worry about than the Olympics but, to be honest, I was very happy when our [figure skating] team won the gold. It's nice that we can show something beautiful about Russia. (Grisha, post-event)

Russians clearly are not blind to their country's endemic corruption, and they did not ignore the record high costs of the Olympics. At the same time, many people felt a national pride that overshadowed the problems of corruption and cost. In the words of a participant from Pskov, "I think it was very hard, but in the end it was worth it. I'm happy the Olympics were in Sochi. I wish I could have

gone."

In terms of support for the mega-event, the shift from a markedly divided society to a mostly supportive one occurred once the games got underway. This is indicative of the wider aspirations of the mega-event project as an attempt to graft a new sense of Russian-ness among the general population. Despite the problems with the Olympic preparations – which few Russians deny – hosting the mega-event encouraged a sense of nationwide unity. At the national level, then, the mega-event project was largely successful at introducing a new sense of Russian-ness to the population:

> I thought the Olympics were beautiful, world-class. I want the whole world to see that we hosted the best games. (Sasha, post-event)

**Local**

> They're working nearby so they cut the electricity every day. We never know how long the power will be out. I don't know what they're doing and I don't care. I am so tired of living this way. How can they treat their own people like this? (Vera, pre-event)

The local people in Sochi experienced the most dramatic transformation, both of space and of attitudes. Prior to the awarding of the Olympics, Sochi was a sleepy, somewhat forgotten Soviet-era resort town, about which prime minister Medvedev said he was "rather embarrassed" (Raibman 2013). The awarding of the Olympics came as a surprise to all 42 participants interviewed in Sochi; none of them knew the city had submitted a bid. From the start, hosting the Olympics was a project created by and largely for the benefit of elites. The goal was to restore this relatively undeveloped area to its former glory as Russia's southern capital, a world-class tourist destination not just for the Russian elite, but ideally for the high flying international set as well.[3] It was routinely stated in official communications that this development would also benefit the local population, and to be sure, much of Sochi's transport, power, and gas infrastructure was either lacking or in need of repair before the onset of Olympic construction.

Because of the Olympics, Sochi built more than 360 km of new and repaired roads, 200 km of railways, new water treatment facilities, new power stations, and new gas lines (OlympStroy 2013). On top of this there appeared new hotels, new restaurants, new cultural centres, new hospitals, and new apartments. Add to this sidewalks, board- walks, street signs and streetlights, new access ramps for the disabled, and upgraded infrastructure all along the beachfront. There are now entire cities built from scratch in the mountains and new roads and railways to reach them, not to mention the stadiums and ancillary facilities for the actual Olympic events. This work came at an unprecedented cost; estimates ranged

as high as US$51 billion, making the 2014 games the most expensive in history – winter or summer (Müller 2015).

The construction effort landed squarely on the shoulders of the local population who endured nearly non-stop disruptions for several years before the event. This led to very negative reactions among certain residents, particularly in the final year of preparation when work reached a fever pitch and construction crews maintained three shifts around the clock:

> They promised gas, they dug up the road, but look: they never finished. Giant pits in front of my house! You can't drive here at all. It's been like this for weeks. (Alexei, pre-event)

In Sochi, locals felt the negative impacts of Olympic preparations more acutely than any positive impacts (Müller 2012). This is despite public acknowledgement of the positive effects on the image of the city, the anticipated increase in economic activity, and notable improvements to infrastructure. In effect, people in Sochi associated the Olympic preparations with general overall benefits for the region and for elites, but not for themselves personally or for the local population at large. These results mirror the responses to a Gallup poll from July to August 2013, where residents of Russia's southern region (of which Sochi is part) overwhelmingly agreed with the idea that the Olympics will benefit the development of infrastructure such as roads and hotels. At the same time, people expressed concern about the negatives associated with the Olympic mega-event, including high costs, corruption, and destruction of the natural environment. Pre-event, 43% of southern region respondents said that the Olympics would harm the interests of local people (Gallup 2014b):

> This [negative reporting] is a shame. Naturally all the hotels should have been completed for the foreign guests. At the same time, they have no idea how much work has been done! It's unfair to focus only on the negative. (Ksenia, during event)

During and after the event, Sochi underwent the same process of national pride that seemed to unify the country as a whole. As opposed to the rest of Russia, however, Sochi had endured the unrelenting disruptions of mega-event construction. This gave a different context for the transformation of attitudes and ultimately amplified the positive feelings from the Olympics. First, the construction stopped immediately before the Olympics and, for the first time in years, Sochi was free from the ceaseless noise of jackhammers and trucks. Nearly every interview participant reported a profound relief when the construction ended. Second, many Sochi locals had access to international news via the Internet and were upset to see their hometown shown in a disparaging light. After years of sacrifice, this negative coverage soured what they assumed would be a grand

welcoming of international guests. As a result, many locals – even those who had been opposed to the mega-event initially – began displaying pride and attachment to their status as Olympic hosts, and this pride was wounded by negative international coverage. They felt a new unified sense of Russian-ness, one built largely on the idea of shared sacrifice for the common good:

> I wish the foreign press would see what good there is here instead of only focusing on the bad. It's poor manners. This should be a celebration for everyone. (Masha, during event)

Small-scale construction resumed once the Olympics passed, but it did not cause the same levels of disruption as before. Indeed, many participants welcomed the resumption of work because they personally stood to benefit. Though the government had originally promised to extend gas and water lines to many villages in the region, numerous projects remained incomplete after the games. However, in the months following, the government endeavoured to fulfil some promises, and successfully extended utilities and services to under-served areas. Even in the village of Akhshtyr', which had suffered tremendously in the preparatory period (Wolfe 2013), residents stated their relief that life was "getting back to normal", and expressed pride in the beauty of the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies. This does not mean that all troubles disappeared, however. In Akhshtyr's case, the drinking wells that were destroyed in the preparatory period still have not been replaced, and many residents still lacked stable access to potable water even a year after the closing ceremonies. Further, real concerns remain about the Sochi region's ability to fill the massive number of hotels built for the event, particularly in the context of a dramatic decrease in foreign visitors to Russia due to the crisis in Ukraine (European Travel Commission 2014).

The post-event joy felt by Sochi residents is a combination of relief at the cessation of construction and acceptance of the unified Russian-ness in the context of negative international coverage. Many locals reported real happiness during and after the Olympics, despite their intimate experience of the associated negative impacts. They expressed pride in the region and country, and visited the Olympic sites with delight as tourists in their own city. Clearly, the mega-event project to introduce a new sense of Russian-ness enjoyed success even in the epicentre of mega-event construction activity:

> My son worked at the Olympic park. He said that foreign athletes were very pleased and impressed with the accommodations. They said it was the finest Olympics they had seen. Why didn't your [foreign] press report that? (Natalia, post-event)

## Conclusion: will instrumentalized Russian-ness persist?

> They really put us through it. Sochi people are exhausted. But I'm proud of

> Russia because we conducted the Olympics very well. (Anatoly, post-event)

This paper pursued the argument that the 2014 Winter Olympics represented a soft power mechanism for the introduction of a new sense of Russian-ness to the inter- national audience and across the domestic population. This new conception of Russian-ness did not take root evenly across the studied groups. On the international level, this project faced an uphill struggle against a significant historical legacy of distrust and antagonism. In the end, the crisis in Ukraine pulled Russia and the USA back to the mutual suspicion of Cold War-era relations, as hard power concerns over- whelmed any potential soft power gains from the Olympics.

On the domestic level, the soft power Olympic project enjoyed more success. Despite an awareness of the problems inherent in mega-events, and knowing that the benefits of hosting likely would not be shared equally among the population, most people across the nation nevertheless came to consider the games to be a point of pride. Against the backdrop of mass protests against president Putin, this sense of Russian-ness was crafted into an instrument for the consolidation of state power. In the aftermath of the games, and particularly in the context of international sanctions imposed against Russia, Russian political elites ably rallied the population around this national success. The new sense of Russian-ness – with a message of shared sacrifice for the common good and delivered through the Olympics – has been indispensible in this regard.

Finally, on the ground in Sochi, the preparations for the Olympics inflicted substantial harm on local residents. However, many residents were propelled into a state of national and local pride by a combined process of relief from the cessation of widespread construction, the external pressure of negative coverage from the inter- national media, and the celebratory spectacle of the mega-event propelled. This speaks to the fluidity of attitudes over time and to the psycho-social power of mega-events, when spectacular celebrations overwhelm community concerns or controversies (Hiller and Wanner 2014). Nevertheless, as time has passed, concerns have reemerged about how to use Sochi's tourist, transportation, and sporting infrastructure:

> During the Olympics we had so many customers, so many tourists. We were working all day and I was speaking English as best I could. It was wonderful. But now, well, see for yourself. There's nobody here. (Alyona, post-event)

Though Russia has a number of major events planned for post-Olympics Sochi, expectations for Russia's southern capital remain unmet. Many facilities have scaled back operations and there are not enough tourists to fill the new hotels. Ultimately, the dreams of making Sochi an international destination have not been fulfilled, and many residents are suffering in an environment of

prolonged economic hardship. This represents a failure of the strategy to employ the mega-event as a mechanism for economic development (Cornelissen 2010; Hiller 2000). At the same time, at least for now, the post-Olympic sense of Russian-ness continues to unify the population – a testament to the mega-event's power over the public imagination (Hiller and Wanner 2011; Horne and Manzenreiter 2006). A future research agenda could trace domestic opinion over time to verify whether the new sense of Russian-ness will fade in the face of continuing economic troubles. Further, given that Russia will host the 2018 FIFA World Cup, examining the upcoming mega-event could highlight variations among different host cities. Finally, a comparative study between Russia and other host nations (both emerging and established) might shed light on how, when, and why mega-event-related projects fail.

In the end, the soft power Olympic project in Sochi met with mixed, though notable, success, consolidating domestic power for the Russian president despite worsening relations with the USA: a solid silver medal.


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## Note on contributor

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## Notes

1. See the rich symbolism in the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2014 Sochi Olympics for how examples of how pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet history have been curated and condensed.

2. Interview participant names have been changed.

3. The G8 summit was to be held in Sochi until the events in Ukraine prompted Russia's inter- national isolation.

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