

## **Russia's 2018 World Cup – A Conversation Beyond Sport**

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Cite as: Wolfe, Sven Daniel. "Russia's 2018 World Cup - A Conversation Beyond Sport." Futbolgrad, December 22, 2016. <https://www.futbolgrad.com/russias-2018-world-cup-conversation-beyond-sport/>.

The scene: an office at the University of Zurich on a Friday afternoon in October. A group of students asking questions about the FIFA Football World Cup.

### ***I don't know much about the World Cup. What is it?***

It is one of the largest sports events in the world, taking place every four years, each time in a different country. The 2018 World Cup will be in Russia. It will be held in twelve stadiums and eleven cities across the European part of Russia. The host cities are a mix of large and small, cities that are better known to foreigners and cities that are almost unknown outside Russia.

The 2018 tournament will run from 14 June to 15 July, hosting 32 football teams – and their fans – from around the world. Ekaterinburg will host only four matches and none of these will be major games. Along with Volgograd, Saransk, and Kaliningrad, Ekaterinburg will only host during the opening stage of the tournament. The rest of the host cities will be filtered out until only St.

Petersburg and Moscow host the final matches. Ekaterinburg's games will be held on June 15, 21, 24, and 27, but the city will host free viewing of games in other Russian cities at the Fan Zone, to be built in the Mayakovsky Central Park.

### ***Let's say I don't care for sport. Why should I care about this?***

Football is a global phenomenon, and the worldwide audience for the World Cup is over a billion people. What happens here matters to a lot of people. The World Cup is big business too, involving thousands of people in many different countries and generating billions of dollars in revenue. The World Cup also changes the cities and countries that host it. If you're a social scientist, you can ask questions about people and places changing in the context of the World Cup. We can see how the tournament affects living conditions change, or we can use

the World Cup to find and highlight dynamics in the country. We can explore the ways a nation sees itself and wishes to be seen, or we can look at the city and study how preparations for the event shape and are shaped by politics. We can also look at impacts and see what happens after a nation hosts.

***So what are the problems with this? What are some things we can look for?***

Since the organizers are preparing for 2018, let's look at what's happening in the host cities to get ready. The preparatory period for any World Cup is complicated. The event is huge – it's not easy to understand everything that is happening – so we have to be clever about what questions we ask.

In any host city, we can see a basic dynamic: FIFA has requirements for their tournament and the host nation has a legal obligation to fulfill these requirements. Everything flows from this contractual relationship: FIFA makes the rules and the hosts implement them. The complications arise when we realize there can be space between what FIFA requires and what actually happens. Things get more complicated when you factor in local, regional, and national politics, and then explore how different actors try to leverage the preparations to fulfill their own agendas.

Since I'm an urban geographer, I like to see how FIFA's requirements play out in the context of these political interactions, displayed in the urban landscape. I start by asking basic questions like: Where is the stadium? How do guests arrive from abroad? Where do they stay? How do they get from one place to another?

So in Ekaterinburg, for example, local and regional politicians jockey for funding from Moscow in order to enact their vision of how the city should be. At the same time, the current economic crisis makes this process harder because money is tight. Moscow officials cut World Cup funding for everything except projects that are directly related to the event, but this raises more questions: Where is the line between investments that are "for the event" and those that are "for something else"? If Ekaterinburg's airport and football stadium are new, but the roads

connecting them are full of potholes and the transit system needs work, how can the city host?

***How is Ekaterinburg preparing? What changes can we see?***

From FIFA's point of view, the city is on schedule with its preparations: there is a new airport, enough high quality hotels, and soon a new stadium. Another question is whether and how hosting the World Cup will benefit residents after the event is gone. This is an important question of competing priorities in the World Cup development process. Ekaterinburg's Central Stadium is a striking example of this conflict. From 2006 – 2011, the stadium was closed as the city spent 2.5 billion rubles on a comprehensive renovation. The new stadium was open little more than a year before authorities closed it again to make it ready for the World Cup. In this second phase of renovation, organizers destroyed the entire stadium except for two historic walls. Not only was the initial 2.5 billion rubles wasted, but the cost for the new stadium will be at least 13 billion rubles.

At the same time, Ekaterinburg has not opened a new metro station since 2012 and the city does not have enough money even to build a station next to the stadium. When authorities say that the World Cup is "for the people," I wonder if a new stadium would benefit the people more than an expanded metro system? Still, the World Cup does force authorities to invest in the city, and there will be new roads and a new transit system and new hotels and new business opportunities. A subtler question to ask is who benefits from these investments and who is left out.

***I'm curious how these developments are covered in the media.***

There can be controversial moments in preparing for a World Cup, and the news media covers this in different ways, depending on who is doing the reporting. Personally, I am interested in seeing how foreign media covers Russia, comparing this to how Russian media covers the preparations, and then comparing both of these to my own experience. Within Russia, there are a number of good sources of information, but at the same time, as in most host countries, the authorities seem keen to spread a message that the tournament is unequivocally good for the country. Critical views do exist, of course, but my

opinion is that they are more rare. These issues exist between geopolitics and urban development and they are often politically thorny. This is particularly true given the current political situation between Russia, Europe, and the United States. Nevertheless, the media lets us look from afar at what is happening in the host cities. If you combine this with event announcements from FIFA and press releases from construction companies and other associated businesses, you can build up a good picture of what direction developments are taking.

***How does Ekaterinburg compare to other host cities?***

In both South Africa and Brazil (hosts for the previous two tournaments) we've seen a legacy of oversized, under-used infrastructure – what we call White Elephants. This could be a problem in the Russian host cities too. Originally, Ekaterinburg was going to build a 45,000 capacity stadium, but organizers negotiated with FIFA for a 35,000-seater instead. After the event, temporary seating infrastructure will be removed and the stadium will have a final capacity of 23,000. This is still too large for the city's football needs, but we can see organizers thinking about the White Elephant problem and taking steps to address it, even if those steps might be insufficient. Other Russian host cities may be in worse positions, however, regarding their stadiums. Saransk and Samara are building oversized stadiums too, but they are much smaller than Ekaterinburg and have less chance of using the facilities once the games are gone. In general, the problem is that infrastructure is being built to suit the requirements of the event, and these do not necessarily correspond with the needs of the people in the city.

***Could we see a happy ending to World Cup development?***

Potentially, the Ekaterinburg city administration could use the development impulse from the World Cup to improve the city's roads and public transit infrastructure. More than new stadiums or luxury hotels, this investment would legitimately benefit many residents. Currently the city has the opportunity to improve aboveground public transportation with a new system of routes and connections. If the city adopts this proposed new system, and if the system functions as expected, I think that people will remember this as a positive legacy of the World Cup. There are problems here, however, of time and scope: there is

a finite time for World Cup development, and as the deadline approaches, organizers tend to sacrifice everything for the immediate needs of the event. So they will certainly build a new road to the airport and new roads around the stadium, but will they have time to build or repair roads in other areas of the city? Will they have time to introduce an improved transit system? Or will they build a transit system to serve only the event before it disappears?

In the end, preparing for the World Cup could leave Ekaterinburg with a new football stadium, a renovated airport, new hotels for guests, and a beautiful transit system. It could also bring attention to the city both nationally and internationally, and perhaps the city will host increasing numbers of prestigious international sporting events, trade fairs, and conferences. Or, possibly the World Cup could leave the city with an expensive, oversized stadium that drains the city budget for upkeep costs, alongside an airport that sees few visitors, in a city filled with empty hotels and an aging, overburdened transit system. The question is whether regional and municipal managers can leverage resources from Moscow authorities to invest in projects that will serve the long-term needs of the city and not only the short-term needs of the event.

Resources for further research:

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