

**Author's accepted copy of "For the benefit of our nation': Unstable soft power in the
2018 Men's World Cup in Russia"**

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Abstract

Situated at the intersection of the literatures on soft power and mega-events, this paper explains the production and evolution of the dominant narratives behind the 2018 Men's Football World Cup in Russia. It begins from the premise that there are multiple unexplored dimensions to the concept of soft power and proposes three advancements: the existence of multiple audiences for soft power narratives, the necessity of examining soft power aspirations in the context of hard power constraints, and the investigation of both of these dimensions with a view that acknowledges the role of time. Exploring both externally and internally targeted narratives, this paper demonstrates not only the attempts by Russian authorities to construct hegemonic ideology among the domestic population, but also reveals how the interplay of hard power and soft power concerns changed these narratives over time.

Keywords: Soft power, hegemonic ideology, mega-events, World Cup, Russia

Introduction: Legitimizing the World Cup

Over coffee at FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) headquarters in Zurich, an executive from the Russia 2018 Local Organizing Committee explained an insider's view on hosting the Russian World Cup:

"You must understand, there will always be criticism about how much everything costs... That is normal... But we are doing all this for the benefit of our country! We are investing into things that will improve the quality of life for the people." (November 2015, Zurich)

Here, the executive summarized one of the central narratives surrounding the 678 billion rubles (approximately US\$ 11.4 billion) invested into the preparations for the World Cup (Russian Federal Government 2017). Of this budget, only 29.4% went to constructing stadiums and other facilities necessary for the sport, while the bulk went towards improvements in transport infrastructure (airports, train stations, and roads), telecommunications, and security. These were the improvements in quality of life that the executive referred to and, in sharing this perspective, he framed the World Cup as more than an international sporting exhibition: rather, he presented it as a widespread investment program benefitting the eleven Russian host cities and their citizens.

This paper explores the messages created by Russian authorities to explain and legitimize the World Cup. It begins by following scholars who employ a soft power framework to understand mega-event rationales (Brannagan and Rookwood 2016; Grix and Lee 2013; Grix and Houlihan 2014; Grix, Brannagan, and Lee 2019; Nygård and Gates 2013), basing the analysis on three refinements. First, it differentiates between external and internal audiences

for the Russian soft power project. Second, it explores the interplay between soft power aspirations and hard power realities. And third, it analyzes these dynamics over time.

This work represents the first in a trilogy of papers that analyzes soft power in the Russian World Cup. The companion papers focus on domestic audiences, tracing the mechanisms by which narratives were carried and exploring the reactions of host city residents. The remainder of this paper situates this work within the broader literature of soft power in mega-events, examines why Russian mega-events are important, and unpacks – over time and in context with hard power – the narratives that legitimized the World Cup both to international audiences and to Russian citizens.

Unpacking soft power in mega-events

The idea that the Russian executive shared – that hosting was valuable in ways that transcended sport and would benefit the population over the long term – was one of the dominant narratives of the World Cup. Throughout the eight years of preparations, this framing was repeated consistently to the Russian population by officials at all levels, from municipal administrators to the president.

Using mega-events like the World Cup or the Olympics for reasons beyond sport is nothing new, and indeed represents one of the primary *raison-d'être* for scholars to study these global spectacles. There is a vast multidisciplinary literature on how mega-events have been used to communicate particular messages for political ends (Allison 1986; Armstrong and Mitchell 2008; Bairner, Kelly, and Lee 2017; Bloyce, Smith, and Smith 2009; Grix 2015; Houlihan, White, and White 2003; Horne 2017; Horne and Manzenreiter 2006).

To make sense of these political aspects of sport, some scholars take inspiration from the notion of soft power (Nye 1990; 2005), referring to the ways in which states can achieve foreign policy goals through cooptation and attractiveness rather than through force. The intention here is to build upon the notion of soft power, imported from the fields of political science and international relations, and applied to mega-events. In this way, hosting a mega-event is seen an attempt for states to boost soft power and to reframe international perceptions of their nation on the world stage, in a kind of sports diplomacy (Grix and Houlihan 2014; Nygård and Gates 2013). Foundational work in this vein has demonstrated the value of unpacking mega-events through the lens of soft power, situated at the intersection of political science, international relations, and sports studies (Grix 2012; 2014; Grix and Brannagan 2016). Through these explorations, it has become clear that the world's so-called emerging economies have attempted to leverage mega-event hosting as part of their soft power toolbox (Cornelissen 2010; Grix, Brannagan, and Lee 2019; Grix and Lee 2013). Indeed, the world's most prestigious mega-events have been hosted increasingly by countries outside of the advanced economies of the Global North and West. This has inspired studies of mega-event soft power in these nations, including the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing (Manzenreiter 2010; Preuss and Alfs 2011), the 2010 World Cup in South Africa (Cornelissen 2014), the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi (Alekseyeva 2014; Wolfe 2016), and the combination of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil (Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015).

There is a much English-language literature on Russia and soft power (for a sample of this diversity, see Feklyunina 2016; Tsygankov 2006), but this does not necessarily focus on the role of mega-events. Of the relatively sparse literature on Russian soft power and mega-events, the majority deal with the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, in particular detailing how Russian geopolitical strategy also attempted to leverage soft power at domestic populations (Alekseyeva 2014; Grix and Kramareva 2017; Wolfe 2016). These studies offer alternative analyses of the Sochi soft power project as an exercise that functioned on international and

domestic levels, with emphasis on the nuances of domestic developments. Situated with these endeavors, this paper seeks to advance this work by beginning with the understanding that soft power – at whatever level – is not as simple as “getting others to want what you want” (Nye 1990, 167), and that mega-events present an opportunity to reveal the complications in applying this concept to real-world situations.

Following Nye (2011), soft power is conceptualized as a relationship between agent and target, which can be understood as the creator and intended recipient, respectively, of a given soft power project. Within this relationship, three soft power resources have been identified: culture, political values, and foreign policies. Narratives are the vehicles that carry these soft power resources from creator to recipient, but this is first predicated on the conditions that the culture be attractive, the values be authentic, and the policies be legitimate and moral (Nye 2011, 84). If the recipient perceives inauthenticity or illegitimacy, then they will not be attracted. In other words, if these fundamental conditions are not met, the narrative transmission is rejected and the soft power project falters. Thus, soft power is not a concrete tool or a predictable machine, but rather something socially constructed, intangible, relational, and subjective. With these sensitivities in mind, an examination of the preparations for the 2018 World Cup reveals three areas where the concept of soft power requires adjustment.

Refining an approach to mega-event soft power

The first problem is that soft power is typically conceptualized as separate from hard power, and few mega-event studies accommodate political projects where hard and soft approaches might intersect, overlap, or blend. If soft power is seen as a means to coopt others to want what you want, then hard power here means the ability to command or to order (Nye 1990, 166), relying on military and/or economic strength. Though Nye (2011, 21) ultimately eschews a binary view, portraying soft and hard powers on a continuum (with one co-opting and the other commanding), this interpretation still presents the powers fundamentally as opposites. Further, when states employ both hard and soft powers to achieve their goals, this combination has been called “smart power” (Nye 2008). Studies on Russian mega-events tend either to focus on one at a time – on hard or soft power – with only a minority working from a smart power view. Among these are Grix and Kramareva (2017), who divide the Sochi Olympics between international hard power and domestic soft power. Similar work compares Sochi 2014 to the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, situating Russian/Soviet mega-event hosting within a grander geopolitical context, and demonstrating how hard power realities dominated potential soft power gains (Kramareva and Grix 2018).

While building on this scholarship, this paper argues that a smart power view still tends towards conceptualizing hard and soft powers as discrete. In contrast, mega-events like the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the 2018 World Cup reveal that soft and hard powers are not necessarily so opposed as imagined: they can intermingle, sometimes complementing one another, sometimes contradicting. Hard and soft powers are contingent and mutable, engaged by heterogenous methods at various times and dependent on a variety of actors, targets, and contextual conditions. During the 2018 World Cup, for instance, Russia’s international conflicts existed uneasily alongside the mega-event-driven narratives of openness, hospitality, and international cooperation (Wolfe 2019). As crystallized by the Ukrainian crisis of 2013/2014 that soured relations between Russia and the West (Trenin 2014b), the tensions between hard and soft powers shaped the articulation of the World Cup and complicated the nation’s soft power goals. Put more simply, a purely soft power lens is insufficient to explore the totality of what is happening in Russian mega-events. Nor does a smart power view do justice to the ways in which hard and soft powers blend, complement, and contradict, as will be shown during the preparations for the Russian World Cup.

The second problem with a traditional soft power analysis is the tendency to focus only on the motivations for the project, and not the target. Thus, we see a preponderance of scholarship grounded in explaining mega-events in terms of diplomatic policy (Almeida, Júnior, and Pike 2014; Cornelissen 2010; Giulianotti 2015; Manzenreiter 2010), but comparatively little about the results or effects of those projects. In other words, if we conceptualize the soft power project as a complete equation composed of narrative generation, transmission, and reception, most studies tend to focus only on the first element while neglecting the latter two.

Along these lines, there is also a tendency to assume that the target audience for soft power narratives is of a different nationality, exemplified by Nye's emphasis on cultural attractiveness as one of the key resources of soft power. This stems from the concept's origins in international relations and political science, but analyzing mega-events through a soft power lens complicates this view. A standard interpretation holds that mega-events are used as a signaling strategy, that is, as an attempt to reframe perceptions of the host nation on the international stage for place promotion or broader geopolitical goals (Horne and Whannel 2016; Preuss and Alfs 2011; Whitson 2004). While this interpretation is accurate, it also elides the fact that soft power can be aimed at the domestic population just as readily as the international, and often mega-events are comprised of a diverse mix of narratives and intended targets, both foreign and domestic (Alekseyeva 2014; Caffrey 2008; Grix and Kramareva 2017; Wolfe 2016). Soft power can be aimed outwards and inwards, and it is possible to refine the soft power lens to discern between external and internal audiences.

This is a separate body of literature that focuses on internal audiences for mega-event projects, but eschews the soft power lens. Typically, this scholarship explores how mega-events are leveraged toward nation-building or national identity projects within the borders of the state (Gorokhov 2015; Koch 2013; 2017; Militz 2016; Tomlinson, Bass, and Bassett 2011). This is another example of the familiar dynamic of a state instrumentalizing mega-events for its political goals, but these scholars rarely conceptualize these processes as soft power. And yet these projects are manufactured by the state and transmitted to a chosen audience for a particular political purpose, and they often involve attraction, persuasion, and co-optation rather than coercion or force. This paper argues that, in many cases, mega-event-driven nation-building and national identity projects represent cases of domestically targeted soft power, and analyzing them through this framework reveals dynamics that would otherwise remain unseen.

Finally, the third problem with traditional soft power is a tendency to ignore the passage of time. There is an illusion of stability cast by many studies of mega-event soft power, where a snapshot of the narratives – usually excluding both the hard power context and the potential domestic audience – is too often taken as constitutive of the whole. But mega-events are long affairs, typically involving nearly a decade of preparations before the opening ceremonies. As such they are subject to temporal logics: given changing political economic circumstances, soft power narratives may wax or wane, as certain arguments gain or lose effectiveness, while entirely new narratives might also appear.

Methodology for a more nuanced soft power analysis

Taken together, these three problems highlight the inadequacy of a traditional soft power lens and suggest that the conceptualization and operationalization of soft power should be augmented in order to make sense of mega-events. Since soft power is inherently intangible, subjective, and contingent, this paper does not claim to advance a universal prescription. But for the purposes of analyzing developments for the Russian World Cup, the rest of this paper is guided by the following sensitivities.

First, the multiple targets for the Russian soft power project must be acknowledged. Given that soft power consists of a relationship between agent and target, the argument begins by delineating international and domestic targets. This division could be refined further, and could even be expanded to identify multiple agents as well, but for the moment a simple distinction between external and internal targets will suffice. Next, the preparations for the 2018 World Cup must be situated within the hard power constraints of Russian geopolitics, allowing for an interplay between hard power and soft power that is more nuanced and contingent than the currently deployed usages of smart power. And finally, Russian mega-event soft power narratives must be considered over a complete lifespan, from submitting the bid in 2010 to the opening of the championship in 2018.

This analysis is based on a research project from 2015 - 2019, combining documentary research with fieldwork and interviews in FIFA headquarters in Switzerland and on the ground in Russian World Cup host cities. The project was inductive, informed by constructivist grounded theory, where research questions were developed iteratively in dynamic interplay with the field, and material was coded according to theme with qualitative data analysis software (Charmaz 2011; Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). The material gathered and generated for this paper includes the official candidature files (also known as the bid books) that launched the World Cup, Russian planning documents from federal, regional, and municipal levels, and internal FIFA documents regarding the quality of the Russian bid and the progress of developments. These provided the official textual background to explain the World Cup from the perspective of organizers and government officials. Further, Russian media was collected and analyzed from 2014 - 2018, comprising over 6,000 articles from mainstream and independent news sites, blogs, and social media. The arguments in this paper are drawn in particular from media articles featuring government and organizing committee speeches and press releases from officials at all levels of Russian bureaucracy. Finally, interviews and discussions were conducted with Russian organizers and government officials involved in the preparations for the World Cup, in order to corroborate or disprove themes that had been discovered in the foundational documents, as well as to identify new themes organically. Residents of Russian host cities were also interviewed, but as they do not feature in the generation of soft power, they will not be featured in this paper (though their reception of soft power narratives will be discussed in the companion papers to this project). In synthesizing these documents, articles, and interviews, this paper attempts to capture and analyze the multiplicity of narratives in the Russian World Cup soft power project.

Throughout all this, the attention to soft power narratives is not intended to reinforce the notion of one 'true' rationale for hosting the World Cup, nor does the argument reinscribe an interpretation of the Russian state as a singular entity. Rather, this paper endeavors "to push beyond the all-too-frequent unitary readings of why political leaders choose to host sports mega-events" and instead follow some of "the infinitely varied symbolic politics and geopolitical encounters that arise" out of the Russian World Cup (Koch 2018b, p.2013).

Multiple audiences for Russian soft-power narratives

The Russian executive whose quotation began this paper framed the World Cup as a long-term benefit for the Russian people. This was a typical presentation by figures in positions of organizational and governmental authority, and over the life of this research project, there were no instances noted where an official presented the World Cup as anything other than an unmitigated good. Depending on circumstance, the scope of this beneficence was either broad and vague or narrow and specific, but in both cases, organizers often exaggerated to the point of platitude and hyperbole.

For instance, Alexander Djordjadze was a key player at the national level in both the bidding and the organizing committees for the World Cup. In July 2016, he spoke at the Moscow Urban Forum and summarized the rosy potential of hosting: "It is a chance for all of us to improve our lives, to use this mega-event as a catalyst for positive change," (Djordjadze 2016). This was a typically vague framing, with the World Cup presented as a universal benefit. Separately, in a regional event, a lower-ranking member of the Ekaterinburg local organizing committee said:

“The championship will increase our tourist attractiveness. We’re improving not just hotels and transport infrastructures, but also personnel training and service culture... We must be world class... None of this would be possible without the World Cup.”

(October 2015, Ekaterinburg)

As opposed to Djordjadze, the regional administrator was specific, tying the mega-event to concrete improvements in the functioning of the city. In both cases, though, these officials presented the World Cup as providing opportunities and bringing progress. Further, in both instances, these men were addressing mostly domestic audiences, and the narratives they delivered were aimed largely at Russian ears.

At the same time, World Cup soft power narratives were also targeted at international audiences, and there also existed multiple target groups within these domestic and international audiences. Figure 1 illustrates these divisions, with the proviso that these groupings could overlap and were not necessarily as clear-cut as shown, given that people often inhabit multiple roles and identities.

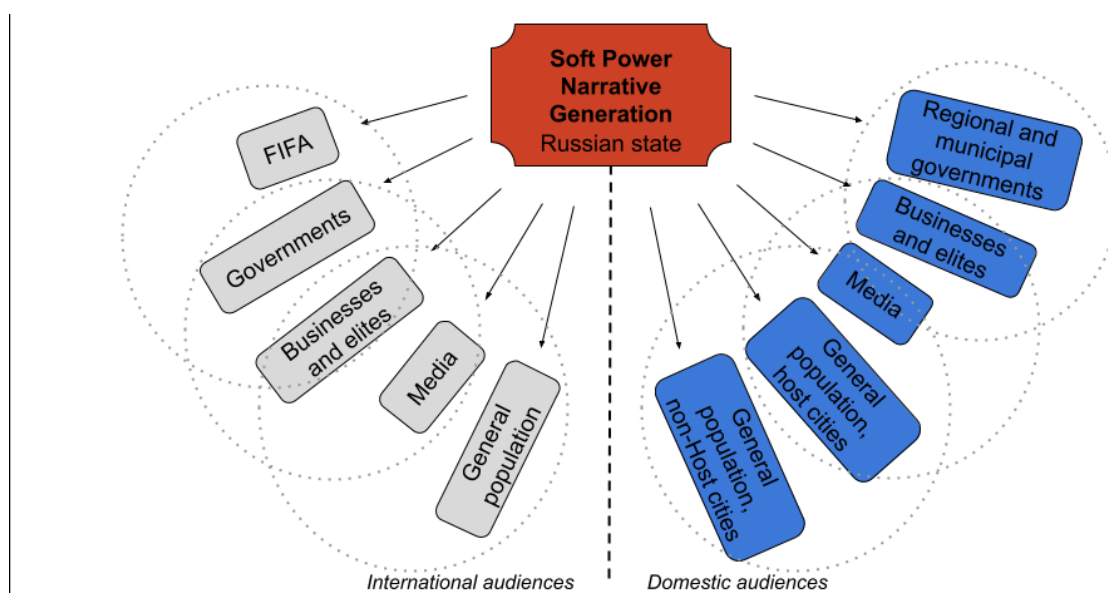


Figure 1: International and domestic audiences for 2018 World Cup soft power narratives, showing overlaps between groups.

Figure 1 illustrates several important aspects of the soft power relationship in the Russian World Cup. First, narratives were created by actors within the central state. As the project itself was hatched and organized from within the state apparatus (Golubchikov and Wolfe 2020), so too was the event’s messaging. Throughout the years of preparations, officials at all levels were responsible for crafting and reproducing the ideas that launched and legitimized the World Cup, and these efforts constituted a concerted attempt to create an “official transcript” or would-be hegemonic ideology (Scott 1992).

Further, this illustration of the multiple audiences for the Russian soft power project is not intended to be a static representation, but rather one snapshot of a dynamic process. Indeed, the soft power system pulsed with multiple overlapping narratives existing simultaneously, aimed at various groups and engaged at different times. Regardless of the content of the narratives, however, in general they were disbursed from the top and flowed down through various technologies to the general population.

A look at World Cup narratives

The primary World Cup soft power narratives were located not only in speeches by organizers, but also in the foundational documents that established Russia’s plans and hopes for hosting. The bid books present the first instance of soft power narratives for the 2018 World Cup and represent a necessary starting point for understanding the soft power narrative landscape. These narratives were aimed at both international and domestic audiences, though since the purpose of the bid book was to convince

FIFA to grant hosting rights to Russia, there was a tendency in the bid books to prioritize international targets. Nevertheless, narratives aimed at domestic audiences were included throughout the bid books as well, aiming to fulfill FIFA requirements related to social responsibility and human development (FIFA 2007).

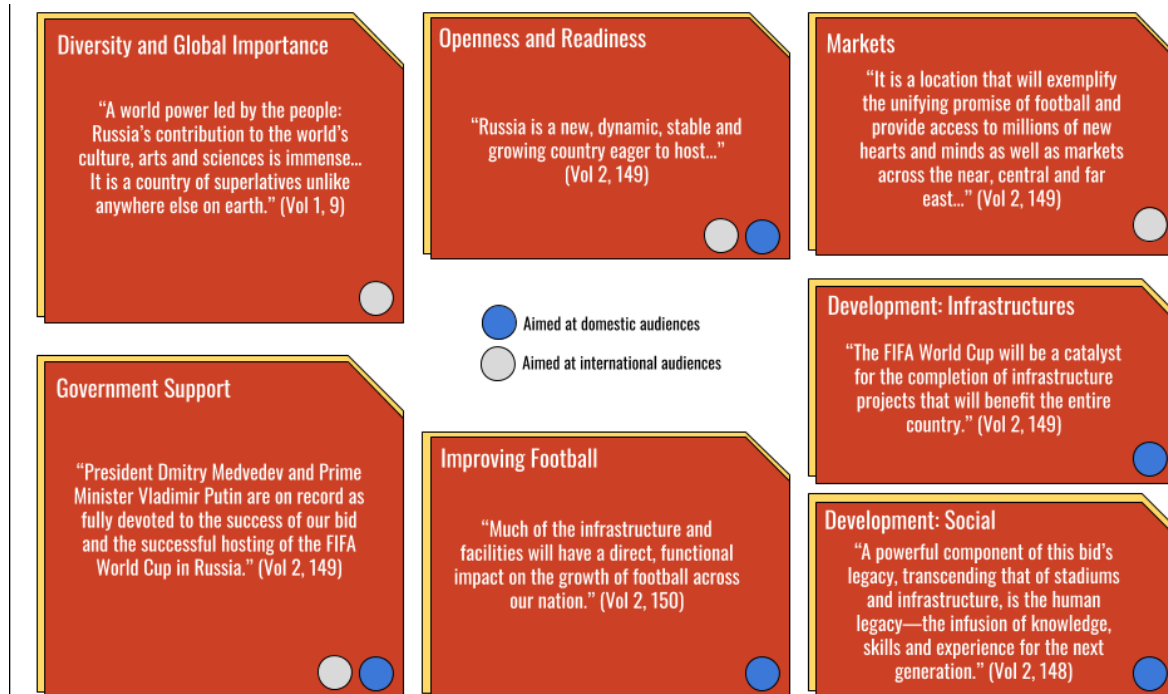


Figure 2: Foundational narratives for the 2018 World Cup, including representative quotations from the 2018 bid books. Source: Russian World Cup Bid Committee, 2018

Examining both international and domestic targets, the foundational World Cup narratives can be sorted into groups according to theme, as shown in Figure 2. These are categorized as: Markets, Improving Football, Development, Government Support, Diversity and Global Importance, and Openness and Readiness. The category of Development is best split into two subcategories, both of which were presented as bringing long-term benefits after the conclusion of the event. The first Development subcategory was centered around infrastructure, and saw hosting as a catalyst for infrastructure projects, both the creation of new infrastructures and the acceleration of existing developments. Conversely, the second Development subcategory was based on social benefits, seeing the World Cup as the engine of social development, including the promotion of sport for healthier lifestyles and the creation of new professional capacities.

Put together, these seven groupings comprised the foundational narratives used in the attempts to create an official transcript or hegemonic ideology in order to explain the World Cup. Exploring each narrative in turn reveals some of the potential conflicts and instabilities within the fundamental priorities that underlay the World Cup, starting before the bid was won.

Beginning with the financial dimension, the narrative of Markets was tailored to satisfy one of FIFA's core goals: to expand the global reach of the World Cup (Radford 2010). Thus, the Russian bid dangled the possibility of opening formerly inaccessible markets to FIFA and other international sport businesses:

"Russia represents a young and dynamic population and a new market of fans for FIFA... Russia's proximity to Western and Central Asia, as well as the Middle East, will provide FIFA with greater access to this large, growing target market." (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010 vol.2, p.149)

Despite its status as a non-commercial entity, FIFA has a multibillion-dollar flagship property to manage. The narrative of Markets highlights the fact that this mega-event exists beyond sport or even politics, and that money is the engine of the World Cup.

At the same time, the World Cup cannot exist without sport, so another of the dominant themes was the narrative of Improving Football. This was tailored to fit with one of FIFA's central goals: contributing to the development of institutional football at international and domestic levels, and the organization strives to ensure that the World Cup improves both the quality of infrastructure and the level of play in the host nation. To fulfill these aspirations, the Russian bid was targeted at improving facilities and organizational competences related to national football. This was the only narrative in the World Cup that was explicitly related to sport, and despite grandiose promises of the potential benefits to the Russian game, it occupied only a small portion of the overall narrative landscape.

In contrast, the bulk of the narratives that explained the World Cup were devoted to overall national improvement not explicitly related to sport, as explained by an organizer in the federal LOC: "We have a large task - to develop the country," (June 2016, Moscow). This term - development - indicated a wide-ranging modernization campaign that framed the World Cup as a program of national importance far beyond a simple tournament. As before, this applied both to material infrastructures and social capacities, but since the Development narratives were so prevalent, it makes sense to split into two subcategories, Infrastructure and Social. Alexander Djordjadze discussed this in terms of the after-effects of hosting:

"On behalf of the organizing committee, I can tell you about the essence of the World Cup, not from the point of view of the sports competitions, but about its impact on the country as a whole... Of course, there will be a legacy after the World Cup. Legacy is the key word... It's something that I would divide into two categories: material and immaterial. The material legacies are primarily infrastructure... and the immaterial legacies are the development of new technologies, new modes of social behavior, and new competencies."
(Djordjadze 2016)

Here, while emphasizing the idea of the World Cup framed not as a sports championship but rather as a project of national development, Djordjadze explained that hosting would change the quality of life in the chosen peripheral host cities, brought about by improved infrastructures and modernized practices.

Investments into infrastructure were the most expensive and extensive World Cup interventions, and were heavily discussed at all levels, from the federal to the municipal. A typical example of these narratives came from the Russian president:

"We have created modern airports, train stations, roads, highway interchanges, and advancements in digital technologies and smart management systems. It is important that this infrastructure will be integrated harmoniously into the country's transport framework and that it will serve the dynamic development of our regions, our cities, and the business activities of our country as a whole. And, of course, that it will improve the quality of life of our people."
(Kremlin.ru 2018)

Here, as witnessed with other officials, the president framed transit improvements as a boost to the quality of life - and one that would be enacted unproblematically with existing systems. This narrative was repeated regularly, at all levels, from the beginning of the preparatory period and continued even after the games had closed.

One of the reasons for the prevalence of these narratives is that interventions into the built environment are immediately visible. It is easier to appreciate a sparkling new airport, after all, than it is to judge the effectiveness of a multiyear, national investment program for developing youth football. At the same time, these visible interventions are also disruptive to the conduct of daily life and have the potential for sparking discontent. For this reason, the Infrastructure Development narratives served a double purpose, publicizing the visible benefits of hosting while preempting possible criticism.

Yet infrastructure improvements were not the only Development narratives present in the World Cup. Moving away from the material domain, the narratives of Social Development were also discussed in

terms of bringing long-lasting benefits to the host population. These were usually presented as a form of job or skills training that would give workers practical experience:

“Thousands will have the opportunity to learn new skills: the event will develop new football administrators, trainers, drivers, hospitality experts, transport engineers and construction workers, to name a few. These roles will teach life-long skills offering hope for a better future for a more highly trained, skilled workforce.” (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010 vol.2, p.150)

These narratives fit into the ideas of Russian modernization – an implicit presentation of the nation as somehow lagging, particularly in comparison to the West. This is an old pattern whereby Russia is discursively presented as a backwards land that must catch up to the more developed West through industrialization and reform (Krastev and Holmes 2018; Mau and Drobyshevskaya 2013; Robinson 2006). This is a common scenario in many post-socialist nations, and one of the reasons that post-socialist elites covet mega-events is because they can be used to make claims to a particular, western vision of modernity (Koch 2010; Militz 2016; Roche 2002). At the same time, many post-socialist nations also host mega-events because of a genuine needs to improve aging infrastructure (Müller and Pickles 2015). The Russian World Cup addressed both of these imperatives, constructing and upgrading infrastructures in the host cities while also imparting new skills, all in an effort to present a coherent picture of a modern nation.

These aspirations were so large as to be impossible without the backing of all levels of government. Government Support, then, was another group of narratives, whereby organizers communicated the wholesale administrative coordination behind the World Cup:

“A national priority for the Russian Federation and a risk-free choice for FIFA... The government guarantees all resources necessary for the staging of a tournament that will exceed every expectation of FIFA.” (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010 vol.2, p.149)

Russian organizers backed up their claims of unqualified government support by signing all the contractual government guarantees requested by FIFA – something that most other candidate hosts failed to do (FIFA 2010). They also touted the official support of the Russian president and prime minister, as well as the mandated cooperation and coordination between fifteen national ministries (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010, 391). It was an impressive show of unity behind the bid and demonstrates the importance placed by authorities on winning the rights to host.

Finally, the narratives of Diversity and Global Importance referred to Russia’s standing in the global arena, reminding international audiences of the nation’s status as a “great power” (Mankoff 2009; Neumann 2008). At the same time, the narratives of Openness and Readiness presented the nation as modern and tolerant:

“A diverse, yet inclusive society, both multi-cultural and united, Russia is a nation of progress and pride, a modern country with a vibrant future. Friendly and open, we possess a genuine spirit of hospitality, a peaceful embrace of multi-culturalism, and a common and passionate love of sports.” (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010 vol. 1, p.11).

Given the current tensions with the West, to say nothing of contemporary Russia’s increasing conservatism and self-styled position as the defender of “traditional values” (Makarychev and Medvedev 2015; Stepanova 2015), this presentation of the nation as tolerant and open is a marker of how much has changed in the past decade.

The narratives of Diversity and Global Importance, combined with those of Openness and Readiness, aimed to remind the world of Russia’s importance, all while portraying the nation as modern, dynamic, stable, and ready for further international integration. The historical context is crucial to unpacking these narratives, as the bid was written in 2009 - 2010, during which time official policy was targeted at increasing international cooperation in order to pursue a widespread modernization agenda (Kremlin.ru 2008; Medvedev 2010). Thus, Russia was presented by the bidding committee as great and storied, yes, but also new and open; developing, yes, but also stable. Under President Medvedev, who himself was framed as a youthful reformer, the World Cup organizers promoted Russia as a great

nation, transitioning from a painful past into a fabulous future. And the World Cup would be part of that historic transition.

The bid book openly discussed these goals for international integration and domestic development: “Russia’s future now depends on cooperation and integration with the world community,” (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010 vol.3, p.389). In this light, hosting the World Cup in Russia would both acknowledge the nation’s progress since the fall of the USSR, as well as encourage continued development towards fuller political and economic integration with the West. These foundational narratives did not survive unmolested in the time between bidding and the opening game.

Stable and unstable narratives

Once Russia won hosting rights for the 2018 World Cup, organizers decided which of the thirteen proposed bid cities would become an actual host city. From the start, the city of Volgograd was considered one of the candidates to be cut: the quality of the city’s infrastructure was too low and, therefore, the cost of accomplishing the necessary work would be too high. Conversely, hosting the World Cup in Volgograd would be richly symbolic: formerly known as Stalingrad, the city was the bloody but triumphant turning point of the Second World War.

President Putin was asked about Volgograd’s chances as host city during an organizing committee press conference. He replied: “*Kak zhe nam pobezhdad bez Stalingrada?*” (Novie Izvestiya 2018), or in English: “How could we possibly win without Stalingrad?” This quip was brilliant politics. In six words, he tied history and culture into the needs of the present, engaging the patriotic memory of the Second World War and combining it with football triumph. Aside from patriotic politics, this remark also speaks to the contingencies inherent in soft power. First, the statement was aimed at a domestic audience and can only be grasped in the context of Russian and Soviet cultural history. Second, this ploy was effective only in Volgograd, where the war remains an indelible part of the city’s character. Finally, the issue of time factors into this narrative as well: having invoked the Battle of Stalingrad once, neither the president (nor any other officials) could do so again – at least not without cheapening the effect or sparking controversy. All told, these aspects underscore the contingent and unstable nature of soft power narratives: they are not constant, predictable, or stable, but rather fluid, contingent, and subjective.

Just as most soft power scholarship tends to concentrate on international targets, so too do they often fail to consider the contingent nature of the narratives brought to light by an attention to temporality. Instead, most studies implicitly present the narratives of a soft power project as singular and stable, while ignoring the idea that multiple narratives might exist, targeted at multiple audiences, with all of these elements shifting dynamically over time (Chitty et al. 2017; Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015; Ji 2017; Manzenreiter 2010). A view that acknowledges the temporality of soft power narratives provides a more nuanced interpretation of developments, particularly given that there are numerous opportunities for social, economic, and political changes during the nearly ten years that pass between winning a bid and opening the games.

Examining the seven thematic groups with a view toward the passage of time reveals that the foundational narratives of the World Cup were decidedly not stable. As shown in the simplified timeline in Figure 3, there were three modes of changes noted: narrative disappearance, appearance, and continuity. Starting from the initial seven, the first group disappeared after the bid was won, the second appeared only after the Ukraine crisis in 2013/2014, and the third remained relatively consistent throughout the entire preparatory period.

These changes can be explained by examining the narratives in the context of their time. For example, three groups of narratives were relevant only during the bidding phase, and once the Russian organizers won the rights to host, they no longer had to argue for the merits of their bid. This is why the narratives of Diversity and Global Importance, Markets, and Government Support disappeared from the narrative landscape and made no more appearances in speeches of organizers and authorities, press releases, or news articles. At the same time, four of the original seven narratives remained viable

throughout the years of preparations. It becomes clear, then, that while some of the World Cup narratives were rendered obsolete after winning the bid, others were unaffected by the passage of time.

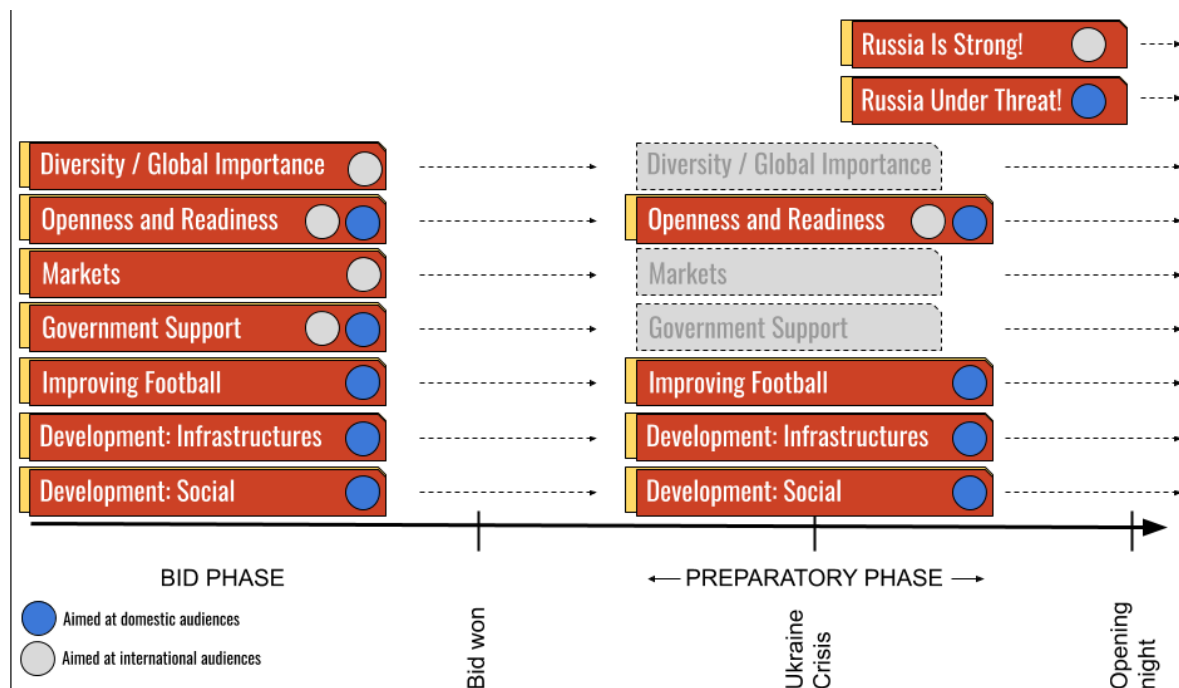


Figure 3: Continuity and (dis)appearance of foundational narratives for the 2018 World Cup, over time.

The third group was comprised of new narratives that appeared due to hard power concerns unrelated to the mega-event: the volatile geopolitical context engendered by the Ukraine conflict (Sakwa 2015; Trenin 2014a) forced hard power constraints into the mega-event soft power project. Two new narratives were generated, and some of the initial narratives grew more complicated. Of these new narratives, one group was targeted mostly at international audiences in a display of Russian strength, while the other faced largely inwards and portrayed Russia under threat in a sort of siege mentality. Maria Zakharova, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gave a typical statement to the domestic audience:

“The anti-Russian campaign in the western press is connected to the 2018 Football World Cup... Soon, we will all witness active measures by the West... they will take very serious actions in regards to Russia hosting this event. Of course, their goal is to disrupt it. They will use all information tactics available... There will be many surprises... We are hurrying to counteract the PR campaign that prepares this informational trash.”
(Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017)

Sparked by hard power conflict, this belligerent tone contrasted starkly with the World Cup narratives of openness and international cooperation. In speeches, press releases, and news articles, national and regional media began distributing the narratives of Russia – independent and indomitable – under threat from malevolent foreign forces that sought to attack the World Cup. Yet simultaneously, these same media outlets and influential individuals continued propagating narratives of openness and hospitality to foreigners within the context of hosting. In this way, hard power tensions exploded from the geopolitical realm, generating new narratives that coexisted uneasily with some of the old narratives.

This paradox of simultaneous hostility and hospitality was managed by sorting foreigners into two groups. The first was the good foreigners, that is, those visitors who loved football and were coming to Russia because of sport. Alongside their love of football, these foreigners might want to see Russia for themselves (and thereby deliver themselves from western anti-Russian propaganda), and they were imagined to be apolitical – unless they spoke in favor of the current political order and the president, in which case they were celebrated as enlightened foreigners who might try to stay in the country after the event (Kharunova 2018; Uzbekova 2018).

In contrast, the second group was composed of bad foreigners, meaning those who questioned or criticized the World Cup, threatened the established order, or who were otherwise politically active. There was a concerted effort to portray critical voices as an army of malevolent foreigners digging for negative news about the World Cup and therefore, by proxy, about Russia (Mamotina 2017; Polyanichko, Baldenkova, and Karpova 2017). This conceptual blending between mega-event and nation allowed organizers to defuse criticism of mega-events developments from within and without. Particularly in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict, framing questions about the World Cup as part of an orchestrated propaganda campaign against Russia allowed organizers to defend against even legitimate criticism. In this way, even credible allegations – for instance of human rights violations during stadium construction (Human Rights Watch 2017; Melnæs 2017; Ruggie 2016) – were largely disarmed.

As it relates to this discussion about soft power, however, the overall point here is to note how the geopolitical, hard power conflict affected Russia's World Cup soft power narratives. Looking at developments with a view toward time brings to light the fluid and contingent nature of these narratives, demonstrating how hard power and soft power clash and blend, and how old narratives can fade while new narratives can arise. In the 2018 World Cup, the unstable nature of the narrative landscape resulted in paradoxes and dissonances that required novel solutions to address. This is why foreigners were presented as either honored guests or malevolent threats. In order to maintain the hegemonic ideology that explained the World Cup to the domestic population, authorities developed the means to make sense of the contradictions between the narratives of openness and the narratives of a nation under threat.

Conclusion: Unstable soft power

As one of the world's most prestigious mega-events, the Men's Football World Cup is a potent tool for authorities to accomplish goals beyond sport. This is an especially attractive proposition for the new generation of hosts outside of the Global North and West, many of whom aspire to use the mega-event as a soft power strategy to reframe international perceptions of the nation (Black and Westhuizen 2004; Caffrey 2008; Cornelissen 2010; Grix, Brannagan, and Lee 2019).

In recent history, this soft power strategy has been attempted with various levels of success in Beijing (Preuss and Alfs 2011; Zhang and Zhao 2009), South Africa (Cornelissen 2010; 2014), London (Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015), Rio de Janeiro (Almeida, Júnior, and Pike 2014), and more. In Russia, the 2014 Sochi Olympics represented the nation's first effort to use a top-tier mega-event to reframe perceptions (Aleksyeva 2014; Grix and Kramareva 2017). On the international level, that project failed due to the conflict with Ukraine, but with the domestic population the project was largely successful (Wolfe 2016). Examining soft power in Sochi 2014 demonstrates both the intermingling of hard and soft power concerns, as well as the existence of multiple audiences for soft power projects.

This paper applies this more nuanced interpretation of soft power to the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Further, it expands the soft power framework to explore the creation and evolution of soft power narratives over the entire preparatory period, from winning the bid to opening the games. In so doing, it not only documents the foundational soft power narratives that accompanied and explained the World Cup, but also moves beyond the narratives themselves in order to explore the messy ways in which hard and soft powers intertwine, aimed at a variety of different audiences, and all of this subject to change over time.

Examining the predominant World Cup narratives from bidding to hosting reveals how unstable soft power projects can be. Over the preparatory period, the Russian federal state complemented the original World Cup narratives (of hospitality, openness, as well as the benefits of the World Cup development program) with narratives of national pride and the Russian history of strength in the face of external threats. In the midst of this maneuvering, the narratives of international integration and Russia as a new and developing nation, which were mostly targeted towards FIFA and most applicable during the bidding phase, quietly disappeared.

The changes in the composition of the World Cup soft power narratives were spurred by events unrelated to sport but, due to the international nature of both the political troubles and the mega-event,

the Ukrainian crisis overlapped with the World Cup and gave rise to narrative contradictions. Put another way, the second half of the World Cup preparatory period provoked the unstable nature of soft power narratives, as developments became a narrative jumble of openness, inclusion, and development, intermixed with nationalism, caution, and isolation. Thus, the utopian soft power visions engaged by the World Cup soft power project at the outset of the preparatory period were rendered partially obsolete by hard power concerns.

Overall, framing the World Cup preparatory period within the conceptual scaffolding of soft power allows for a novel interpretation of the nation- and identity building processes common in mega-events (Gorokhov 2015; Koch 2017; Tomlinson, Bass, and Bassett 2011). This interpretation reveals attempts by Russian authorities to establish a hegemonic ideology – targeted at the domestic audience – that legitimized the World Cup as beneficial for the population over the long term. These benefits were discussed concretely as modernized infrastructures and abstractly in terms of improved quality of life. This establishes the domestic goals of soft power within a broader understanding of the strategies of governmental cooptation and coercion, and how mega-events can be used in those attempts.

In this light, this paper offers three theoretical contributions, the first of which is a reorientation of soft power scholarship towards the domestic. Rather than the familiar story of a host nation attempting a geopolitical reframing of international perceptions, this view allows for a new perspective on domestic issues by framing them as projects of national importance managed via mega-events by the state. This is particularly true for Russia, where the high degree of centralized control of the World Cup means that soft power narratives can be considered governmental strategy (Nygård and Gates 2013), thereby providing new tools to analyze the relationships between state and population.

Second, this paper encourages an analysis of soft power in fuller context, making space for hard power constraints in interplay with soft power aspirations. For Russia, the dramatic souring of international relations that followed the hard power conflict in Ukraine resulted in a shift in World Cup soft power narratives. Hard power meant an existential threat to the World Cup, notably in the fear that the games would be stripped from Russia (AIF 2015; Ivanov 2016; Slyusarenko 2016). For this reason, new soft power narratives emerged in the aftermath of the conflict in order to adapt to these hard power conditions. Moreover, this was couched in a discursive blending of the World Cup with the Russian nation itself, meaning that an attack against either was construed as an attack against both.

Finally, the blending of hard and soft powers is most visible when examining a soft power project over time, so a view that accommodates temporality is the third contribution presented by this paper. In this light, mega-events represent an ideal subject, as nearly a decade typically passes during the preparations for hosting, giving ample opportunity to witness geopolitical changes and new political configurations. Taking a wider view, this means that soft power is not as stable as previously imagined, and that a view towards the instabilities of soft power provides opportunities for deeper and more nuanced investigations.

In defying easy categorization, the Russian World Cup illustrates these nuanced dynamics and problematizes the traditional ways in which both soft power and mega-events are understood. The fundamental narratives that accompanied and explained the World Cup represented an attempt at ideological hegemony, whereby authorities could produce and maintain an official transcript of the proceedings. This attempt to craft and inculcate hegemonic thought was not as uniform, stable, or consistent as might be imagined by a traditional reading of soft power. Instead, a messier and richer understanding can be discovered by unpacking the narratives over time and in terms of their multiple audiences and intersections with hard power. Even something as straightforward as the idea of the mega-event improving quality of life turns out to be less simple than it seems. Rather, through the 2018 World Cup, soft power is revealed as contingent and unstable – a corrective to the more uniform representations that have dominated most soft power scholarship so far.

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