Potemkin neoliberalism: developing Volgograd through the 2018 Men's World Cup in Russia

Sven Daniel Wolfe
Department of Geography and Sustainability, University of Lausanne

dwolfe@geo.uzh.ch

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4517-6056

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Abstract:
This paper investigates the preparations for the 2018 Men's Football World Cup in Russia through the lens of neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism. Unlike many other mega-events, this World Cup was orchestrated by the central state, though using neoliberal rhetoric to legitimize a wide-ranging urban development program aimed at modernizing peripheral host cities. Grounded in an exploration of urban development in the host city of Volgograd, this paper demonstrates that the intersection of state-led development impulses, neoliberal rhetoric, and local needs resulted in a mega-event that emphasized a narrow form of development over more substantial interventions that could have benefited the host population more efficiently. To make sense of these developments, the paper proposes the concept of Potemkin Neoliberalism, exploring the various dimensions of superficiality inherent in this state-led mega-event.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, urban development, mega-events, Potemkinism, Russia

Exploring the Russian World Cup

I stood outside of a government building in Volgograd, Russia, hoping to meet someone in the Local Organizing Committee (LOC) for the 2018 Men's Football World Cup. It had been relatively easy to speak with Russian organizers at the federal level – the Russia 2018 nationwide press secretary was responsive and helpful – but at local scales it was a different story. There had been no response to my emails and I had no number to call so I went in person to the Volgograd LOC, located within the premises of the Municipal Committee for Physical Culture and Sport.

It was beautiful inside, a grand entryway with stone columns, but it was empty. I climbed a wide marble staircase, past paintings of famous Volgograd sports figures, and finally found a receptionist on the second floor. She showed me to the LOC offices and left me at a steel door with a sticker of the Russia 2018 logo. I knocked but there was no response, so I opened the door to find a set of empty offices, wires dangling from the ceiling and assorted computer equipment on the floor (Figure 1). Either they were moving in or moving out, but wherever the Volgograd LOC worked, it was not here. It was one year to the day before the opening of the World Cup.

Figure 1. Empty offices of the Volgograd regional local organizing committee. The sticker on the internal door reads, 'I live for football' under the Volgograd LOC logo. Source: author.

This vignette hints at some of the defining features of the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Though the federal LOC never approved my request for credentials to visit stadium construction sites, they were remarkably forthcoming in providing access to high-level officials. In contrast, the Volgograd regional LOC was difficult to contact and opaque in their functioning. Moreover, the emptiness of their offices struck me as symbolic of wider processes in the organization of this mega-event, reminiscent of Anne-Marie Broudehoux's (2017) thinking on Potemkinism: exploring beneath a superficial surface to reveal a shambolic and fraudulent interior. The notion of maintaining a pleasant exterior while masking an unpleasant or absent reality has its origins in the story of Catherine the Great's exploratory journey to Crimea, and while the story is likely apocryphal, the concept has survived to explain political and economic developments worldwide (O'Malley 2007; Panchenko 1999). In this paper, I employ the concept of Potemkinism to explore the organization and articulation of the Russian World Cup, grounded in an analysis of urban development projects in the host city of Volgograd, located about 1000km away from Moscow in southwest Russia. At the same time, interrogating these dynamics through World Cup-driven urban development reveals a more nuanced Potemkinism that exists beyond the strictly visual binary of superficial surface and hidden substance.

Unlike many other global mega-events, the 2018 Men's World Cup in Russia was largely a project initiated and managed by the central state. This contradicts a common way of understanding mega-events, that is, as processes of globalized neoliberalism that rescale cities and states to promote urban regions over national economies (Brenner 2004; Hall 2006; John and McDonald 2019; Miller 2012). Though it is in danger of being misused as a catch-all term, I use neoliberalism here to describe a series of concrete projects (with concomitant economic, political, and cultural dimensions) marked by the retreat of Fordist-Keynesian models of distribution and the ascendance of market rationalities of competition and entrepreneurship

(Brenner and Theodore 2002; Harvey 2007; Hilgers 2011; Wacquant 2010). In this view, hosting mega-events like the World Cup is understood as part of the transition to urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey 1989), shifting towards more competitive forms of governance where certain urban territories are promoted to profit from of locational advantages arising in the wake of globalizing capitalism (Brenner 2004; Trubina 2014).

In contrast, I argue that the Russian World Cup troubles the standard conceptualization of neoliberal mega-events presented above, instead presenting an example of a mega-event that was managed from the central state but lubricated by neoliberal rhetoric of accelerated urban development and global competition. Traditionally, the Russian state has been viewed as a centralized and hierarchical structure, with the president as the fundamental figure and ultimate authority, dispensing decisions and authority down a chain of command from federal to regional and municipal levels (Sakwa 2008). This is known as the power vertical, and it is understood that, since taking office in 2000, president Vladimir Putin has strengthened his own power as well as the role of the central state, all at the expense of regional and local authorities (Ross 2003; Sharafutdinova 2013). This high presidential profile, however, has led many scholars, journalists, and other observers to use president Putin as an all-explanatory factor for almost any developments. This tendency was in evidence during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, where analysts commonly underscored the personal involvement of the president, sometimes even conflating Putin, the nation, and the games (Lenskyj 2014; Orttung and Zhemukhov 2017; Taras 2017).

Other scholars have worked to complicate this conceptualization of the Russian power vertical, presenting more nuanced pictures of the domination that fails to provide effective or just governance (Ledyaev 2008), or explorations of the informal system of obligations that permeates the bureaucracy (Ledeneva 2013). Moving down the scalar ladder, scholars have also studied how the context of growing authoritarianism affects the conflicts and interactions between centralized power and relatively stable subnational institutions (Gel'man and Ryzhenkov 2011), as well as the systems of direct control by which senior officials personally oversee projects of state importance (Monaghan 2012). In line with this work, I situate my study of Volgograd first within an understanding of the dominance of the central state, sited in Moscow, and personified in the president. But I also aspire to move beyond this framing, uncovering the complexity of multiple intertwined interactions between federal, regional, and municipal levels of government. Following this, the Russian World Cup demonstrated how the planning and articulation of the event is neither a variegated neoliberalism, nor entirely a state-centered product. In other words, what at first appeared to be expressions of traditional globalized neoliberalism turned out, in the context of Russia's dominant central state, to be something less easy to define. I argue that examining developments through the lenses of Potemkinism helps unpack these contradictory characteristics, and propose the notion of Potemkin Neoliberalism to help make sense of the ways in which this World Cup was managed by center, lubricated with neoliberal legitimations, and presented to various audiences in a controlled and superficial manner, while masking other realities underneath.

The data for this paper was generated as part of a multi-year research project investigating the planning, articulation, and impacts of the 2018 World Cup in Russia. The project was oriented towards a number of peripheral cities, of which Volgograd was one, and data was generated

inductively, informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2011; Thornberg and Charmaz 2014). Volgograd was chosen as a study site not only because it is an industrial city trying to reinvent itself for a post-industrial moment, but also because of its outsized role in Russian history and the popular memory. Formerly known as Stalingrad, this city marked the turning point in the Second World War and was the site of one of the bloodiest battles in human history – the Battle of Stalingrad, from August 23 1942 to February 2 1943 – killing close to two million people (Hellbeck 2015) and leaving indelible scars on the city and the nation. For the residents of Volgograd and the citizens of Russia overall, this battle remains a source of pride and a reminder of sacrifice and grief. It also obliterated most of the city and, even decades later, Volgograd seemed symbolically and materially inextricable from the war: the World Cup stadium was sited near the city's most famous war monument, and this symbol of Russian victory also featured heavily in the host city's marketing materials. Moreover, workers preparing for the World Cup at construction sites all around the city unearthed mangled military equipment, human remains, and unexploded munitions, all left over from the war (Tarasov 2018; TASS 2014).

Grounded in an ethnographic approach sensitive to local contexts and researcher positionality, I conducted participant observation, go-alongs, and informal, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews within Volgograd, the other host cities, and FIFA (Bernard 2012; Crang and Cook 2007; Kusenbach 2017). Much of this fieldwork was informed by visual anthropology, embedded in an appreciation of the senses, sensual experience, and action (Pink 2006). I complemented this fieldwork with documents from FIFA, the Russia 2018 Organizing Committee, and Russian federal, regional, and municipal authorities, as well as local news and social media. Here, I present the results of this work in a largely autoethnographic style in order to underscore the crucial role of positionality, as I worked in dynamic, contingent, and inductive interplay with the people and places involved in the articulation of the World Cup.

State origins of the bid

In 2009, FIFA – Fédération Internationale de Football Association, the owners of the World Cup – opened bidding for the 2018/2022 editions of their mega-events. As opposed to the Olympics, which are bid for by candidate cities, World Cup bids are managed by a nation's football association. In Russia, the national association is called the Russian Football Union, and it is deeply intertwined with the central state. In other words, the Russian state was involved from the start of the World Cup project, before the bid had even been won. Key players from within the state apparatus formed the Russia 2018 World Cup bid committee, an organization dedicated to convincing FIFA that Russia was the best candidate nation to host this mega-event. At the heart of the Russian bid committee sat Chairman Vitaly Mutko and Chief Executive Officer Alexey Sorokin (Borbély 2017), both of whom were in charge of the Russian Football Union, the governing body of Russian national football. Sorokin served as the Union's General Secretary and CEO, while Mutko, as president, represented Russia as a Member Association within FIFA.

At the same time, both men – but especially Mutko – were involved with state structures. While president of the Russian Football Union, Mutko also served as representative to the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament. Later, he was promoted to Sports Minister

for the Russian Federation, and performed both roles until then-president Medvedev required all sports federations to be led by professionals, not government officials. Mutko resigned as president and join the Union's board of trustees instead (RIA Novosti 2009a; 2009b). Sorokin, meanwhile, had worked as a diplomat in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs before serving as the Moscow city government's Deputy Director of Sport (Kominsky et al. 2018). President Medvedev's attempts to separate sport and state may have been superficially successful, but this did not appear to apply to the World Cup bid: Mutko and Sorokin played important political roles in federal structures and had connections there which they leveraged to gain official government support (Borbély 2017). After all, the state may be dominant but it is not uniform, and there is a difference between working within the government and making a project an official aim of the government as a matter of policy.

Mutko and Sorokin's efforts at securing official government approval for the World Cup bid could hardly have been more successful: in 2009, Vladimir Putin (in his temporary role as prime minister) committed the federal government to support the World Cup bid fully. Putin put the central government squarely in charge of the World Cup bid by placing First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov in the bid committee, making the top three individuals government men (Gazeta.ru 2009; Russian Federal Government 2009). The 2018 World Cup Russian bid book – a contractually binding document – featured the total support from the highest levels of government as a key selling point, giving particular weight to the promises contained therein. It is worth reviewing some of the bid book to get a feel for the scope of government involvement and to understand how prominently it was promoted:

> "Mr. Shuvalov's role, specifically, is to oversee the coordination between all levels of government, including the proposed Host Cities and regions, and across all key ministries and agencies. Those ministries and agencies are listed below:
>
> - Ministry of Sport, Tourism and Youth Policy
> - Ministry of Finance
> - Ministry of Economic Development
> - Ministry of Health and Social Development
> - Ministry of Regional Development
> - Ministry of Transportation
> - Ministry of National Resources
> - Ministry of the Interior
> - Ministry of Civil Defense of Emergencies (EMERCOM)
> - Ministry of Foreign Affairs
> - Ministry of Information Technologies and Communication
> - Federal Customs Service
> - Ministry of Culture and Mass Communications
> - Ministry of Education and Science
> - Ministry of Defense
>
> This close collaboration amongst all levels of government and between departments is not unique to Russia's FIFA World Cup™ candidacy, and it will continue during the planning and implementation phases of the tournament, as well as long afterwards. Should Russia be named host of the 2018/2022 FIFA World Cup™, an organizational structure at the highest level of the government will be put in place. The preparations will be supervised and coordinated under direct control of the President of Russian Federation… Such visibility and attention at the highest level of the Federal Government not only

> maximizes efficiencies between organizations, but also facilitates timely delivery and quality operations. Such complete government support extends to each of the 13 Host Cities, whose City Councils unanimously have declared their unqualified commitment to Russia's bid…"
>
> (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010, 391)

Here, organizers emphasized the commitment to hosting, without reservation, at all levels of government. The bid guaranteed the cooperation of fifteen national ministries, mandated the unqualified support of every host city administration and associated councils, all of which voted unanimously to support the bid (itself a clear expression of the country's authoritarian control). Moreover, the bid promised the personal involvement of the president himself, which certainly made for a convincing argument to FIFA that the World Cup would be executed without fail – particularly due to the perception of Russia as a centralized hierarchy under an all-powerful president. If the idea of the Russian power vertical could be taken at face value, then winning presidential approval was a sign of guaranteed success. In this way, the Russian bid promoted authoritarian centralization as an asset in order to convince FIFA that Russia was a safe bet. This was a wise strategy, as FIFA depends on the financial viability of the World Cup and must minimize risk for its flagship tournament. In concert with the FIFA president's desire to access new markets in the east, guaranteed governmental support made the Russian bid stand out (Borbély 2017; Radford 2010). In its bid evaluation, FIFA repeatedly praised the guarantees, support, and alignment promised at all levels of Russian government (FIFA 2010).

Federal players in the preparations

The Russian World Cup was a state project even from the bidding phases, and this government involvement continued during the many years of preparing for the mega-event. After FIFA assigned hosting rights to Russia, the bid committee reconstituted itself as the Russia 2018 Local Organizing Committee, or LOC. Key people from the bid phase assumed new roles within the LOC, which grew to include representatives from national, regional, and municipal governments. Over time, the organizational structure saw numerous promotions, lateral moves, and other internal political maneuverings, but one thing remained consistent: their connections with government. For instance, Vitaly Mutko continued as Russian Sports Minister, Chairman of the federal level LOC, and member of FIFA's executive committee, until he was banned from the Olympics for his role in the Sochi 2014 doping scandal (International Olympic Committee 2017). To avoid contaminating the World Cup, Mutko resigned from the FIFA executive committee and from his duties as LOC chairman (Kelner 2017; Russian Federal Government 2017). He was, however, promoted to Deputy Prime Minister, a sign that punishment at the international level carried little weight within Russia. Thus, one of the architects of the 2018 World Cup was not only an influential federal minister, but during the course of the preparations – and regardless of international scandal – he even advanced his own career within the federal government.

Alexey Sorokin also transferred to the LOC, beginning as CEO of the federal LOC before moving to the FIFA executive committee after Mutko's ban (FIFA 2018). Similarly, Igor Shuvalov shifted to the federal LOC as well, continuing the synergies between government and mega-event since he, as Deputy Prime Minister, was also responsible for national socioeconomic development and financial planning (Finmarket 2012). The point here is that, no matter who occupied which positions, the LOC was staffed by individuals either drawn from government

ranks or who held dual appointments within government and the LOC. This meant that the LOC was built in a way that mirrored the functioning and the features of the Russian power vertical, as illustrated by an executive from the federal LOC who told me:

> "I am not worried [about the preparations]… We have personal responsibility. We know who is responsible for what in each city. I go to each city every 2-3 months and ask how things are…" (S17)

These visits, where a superior federal official "asks how things are," are crucial moments in the functioning of Russia's centralized government structure. This system of personal responsibility, wherein figures at each level are held accountable by individuals above them in the hierarchy, is a feature of Russia's power vertical and network of patron-client relationships (Fisun 2012; Gel'man 2015; Guliyev 2011). Though more common in the (semi)authoritarian states of the Global East, using this organizational system to prepare for a mega-event differs from the neoliberal model of mega-event planning that is more familiar in the Global North. Engineered largely by Peter Ueberroth in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, a neoliberal Games generally means private financing, widespread corporate sponsorship, and organizing committees composed mostly of prominent figures in the business community (Reich 1986; Wenn 2015). To be fair, this is an ideal type categorization and various mega-events can have greater or lesser neoliberal tendencies visible in their organization.

In contrast, the Russian World Cup organizational structure replicated the form and functions of the state government and the power vertical. The president sat at the top and was surrounded by federal officials, dispensing decisions down the hierarchy to the federal LOC, then to the regional LOCs, and finally to the individual municipalities.

Potemkin management

One of the features of mega-events is the dimension of international collaboration, and the 2018 World Cup was not solely a Russian production. FIFA needed a means to communicate with the LOC and monitor developments, so Russian organizers established a FIFA-LOC board, located in the power vertical below the level of the president and his appointed managers. The function of this board was to allow FIFA representatives to monitor the preparations, verify that the event's organizational and infrastructural requirements were met, and issue recommendations – though final authority remained not with FIFA but with the Russian organizers. This board conducted a number of inspections during the preparations, with FIFA delegations touring the host cities in well-publicized visits managed by the LOC. These affairs were short and controlled, as FIFA inspectors were shepherded around important sites in the host cities. After one of these tours, a journalist explained to me:

> "What can you see in such a short time? Nothing. And, you know, so much is done for the checkmark. They're supposed to build a certain way so they follow the rules, but it's not done properly… It's like the elevators for people with limited mobility. They exist, but they don't work and no one actually uses them." (K103)

These inspections – typically lasting only some hours per city, and oriented primarily around the stadium – exemplified the Potemkin nature of World Cup preparations, as Russian officials managed the visits to present an image of progress while concealing less palatable conditions. FIFA officials were taken to beautiful facilities that appeared to fulfill requirements, but this did not mean that the substance behind the polished surface was functional, just as the powered lifts installed on stairways were not in reality connected to electricity. Commonly, to conclude a visit, FIFA officials would make a cookie-cutter statement to the press praising the pace and quality of developments (for typical examples, see Match! 2017; TASS 2018). Notably, FIFA officials had little authority to dictate developments. Instead, the power vertical embodied in the LOC structure revealed where ultimate power actually lay, and Russian organizers merely placated these visiting inspectors with Potemkin presentations.

The point here is to underscore the degree of state involvement – at all levels, federal, regional, and municipal – in the management and production of the 2018 World Cup. Understanding this mega-event as a centralized state project, conceived in the capital and managed down the power vertical into the regions and host cities, troubles the traditional academic conceptualization of mega-events as simply another example of globalized neoliberal restructuring, wherein subnational scales take precedence over the receding nation state (Hall 2006; John and McDonald 2019). There were discrepancies, however, between the ideal functioning of the power vertical, and how things actually played out during the preparations. These discrepancies underscore the fact that the Russian World Cup was neither a purely state project, nor a neoliberal exemplar, but rather something that defied easy categorization, something that existed beyond the limitations of the binary.

Potemkin roads

The preparations for the World Cup consisted of a series of nationwide infrastructure projects that aimed simultaneously to improve material conditions in Russian peripheral host cities while also fulfilling FIFA requirements. Infrastructure projects related to transport construction and renovation were the largest portion of the World Cup budget (Russian Federal Government 2013). They were initiated from the center and then dispersed to the regions, as organizers within the federal LOC enacted a standardized modernization program to be implemented in each host city by the regional LOC. Each peripheral host city was subject to this center-led modernization plan, involving upgrades and new construction to sites deemed important: stadiums and hotels, airports and train stations, and road and rail links between these. Within each region this standardized plan was introduced and legitimized with neoliberal rhetoric: boosting investment potential and attracting foreign investment, forging public-private partnerships, and improving the city's position on international ranking tables – all relatively new discourses for Russia, especially in the peripheries (Aidis, Estrin, and Mickiewicz 2008; Shmulyar Gréen 2009).

In the end, the standardized infrastructure projects manifested in area-specific ways unique to each host city, though all within the framework of the national plan. In other words, close attention to the ways in which these center-led infrastructure investments actually played out on the ground reveals convoluted moments where neoliberal rhetoric overlapped and conflicted

with centralized planning, resulting in something that defied and augmented traditional understandings of mega-events as processes of neoliberalization.

These dynamics become clear when examining specific infrastructure projects, particularly those not directly tied to sport. From the start, the Russian bid book underscored the long-term value of these infrastructure investments, for instance in this typical snippet: "The FIFA World Cup will be a catalyst for the completion of infrastructure projects that will benefit the entire country," (Russia 2018 World Cup Bid Committee 2010, vol.2, p149). Translating this into concrete examples, airports in every host city were expanded and upgraded to meet FIFA's requirements for quality and capacity, based on maintaining sufficient throughput capacity to handle a World Cup stadium crowd (Kassens-Noor 2014). These requirements were communicated to the federal LOC, who dispersed instructions down the power vertical to the regional LOCs. The airport interventions within each host city came from a sort of double centralization, as the overall requirements were established by FIFA in Zurich, before blending with the imperatives of national state spatial modernization projects directed by Moscow. This had concrete results: by the start of the World Cup, every host city had a high capacity, international-quality airport, part of a centralized effort to boost the investment potential of the regions.

At the same time, countervailing tendencies were seen in the actions of local and regional authorities who attempted to leverage the World Cup development program for specific municipal needs. For instance, within the framework of World Cup preparations, Volgograd authorities built a new road along the bank of the Volga River. A municipal representative explained:

> "Volgograd has a linear layout, so [a new] road will help relieve the pressure on the central auto thoroughfares. This will improve the transport situation significantly. Along with this, the beautification of the waterfront territory will make it attractive not only for drivers but also for all Volgograd residents and guests." (L149)

Volgograd, a long and thin city, stretches out for almost 100km alongside its namesake river. Before the World Cup, the city had only three major boulevards running this length, so transit represented a persistent challenge for urban life, and serious traffic jams were common. Moreover, road quality was generally poor, especially in the peripheral zones but also occasionally in the central areas. Referring to the lamentable roads, one resident quipped: "This is why the SUV is the official vehicle of Volgograd… You'll never see an official driving around in a car that doesn't have high clearance," (D42). Because of this, road construction and improvement were among the most celebrated aspects of the World Cup development program.

This program was an area-specific articulation of the centralized World Cup development plan, a local effort to differentiate the city and improve quality of life. Organizers attempted to address what they identified as local needs within the broader requirements of hosting., as expressed by this statement from the regional governor on the long-term value of the new road:

> "The new parallel road is important not only for the 2018 World Cup, but also for transport development, as well as for the development of the waterfront zone and for all of Volgograd." (Maslova 2017)

Here, the governor explained World Cup developments as a transformative moment for the city overall. In his telling, the parallel road – which began between the new football stadium and the river – would improve the quality of life for all of Volgograd. The road thus became more than a road, instead transforming into a panacea to solve the region's socioeconomic stagnation. Moreover, these investments were part of an array of similar World Cup-driven improvements, as the governor continued:

> "Residents know that the region is undergoing comprehensive work to renew essential services like housing and utilities. These are facilities that aren't visible at first glance, but they raise the quality of life for everyone. But most importantly, this will remain as a foundation for further development." (Maslova 2017)

These "invisible improvements" included new sewer lines, electricity and gas improvements, and road repair. Most of this work occurred in more central neighborhoods but still had the potential for positive material impacts on many residents. Underlying these developments was the idea of making the city more attractive for investors and tourists – the familiar neoliberal argument of interurban competition. Adequate quality infrastructure was essential for this attractiveness, and the idea that subsequent benefits would trickle down to residents went unquestioned: residents' lives were simply assumed to improve from the new infrastructures (a more likely scenario when regarding the construction of sewer lines rather than luxury hotels) and they would enjoy real benefits from the increased flows of tourists and capital.

These tendencies were also visible in a road project connecting Volgograd's airport to the city. To start, there was a standardized project in every host city to repair and expand this linkage from the airport to important areas in the center, primarily the football stadium and the best hotels. It was just as centralized as the airport improvement projects, managed by regional authorities, but launched and largely funded by the federal government. In Volgograd, this road improvement ran about 12km from the airport until it intersected with one of the city's main boulevards. The federal budget funded 95% of the project, but it was administered by the Volgograd Oblast Ministry of Transport and Road Maintenance (Volgograd Regional Government 2013). A four-year project, it was scheduled to be completed six months before the opening of the World Cup, which allowed for potential construction delays. This so-called "Aviators' Highway" project was considered as vital as the airport and the stadium, and was prioritized by authorities to such a degree that it was budgeted only slightly less than all other Volgograd region World Cup transport infrastructure projects combined. That so many of the city's roads needed repair made Aviators' Highway all the more controversial, as large swaths of the city in daily use by residents were in dismal condition but excluded from necessary improvements.

Moreover, the Aviators' Highway project itself was beset with controversy and corruption. A company called Dorstroyservis was the contractor for this Volgograd project, having won the government tender no less than three times. The first contract was annulled by the federal antimonopoly bureau because Dorstroyservis was the only bidder. During the second tender, the regional transport ministry disqualified three of the five bidders before awarding the contract once more to Dorstroyservis, even though its bid was highest. When critics noted that

Dorstroyservis had no experience in road construction, the regional transport ministry revoked the contract and reopened bidding. Finally, the third time around, four companies participated in the bid; yet once again Dorstroyservis won the tender (with a higher bid) and began work on the project at last (GorodGeroev 2017).

Soon, cracks and potholes appeared in completed sections of the Aviators' Highway and in other road projects nearby. Investigations revealed the company used substandard asphalt, violating regulations for thickness and quality (AIF 2017; IARegnum 2017). With a year left before the World Cup, Dorstroyservis halted work on Aviators' Highway, complaining they were owed over 600 million rubles (USD $10 million) by the regional transport ministry (Bloknot Volgograd 2017). Volgograd authorities placed Dorstroyservis on its list of banned companies and awarded the project to a different company (Pechenova 2017). Later, Prime Minister Medvedev, who had flown around Volgograd in a helicopter rather than risk the atrocious roads experienced during a previous visit, returned to the city and approved of the new Aviators' Highway (Sheremeteva 2017). In the meantime, most residents – who did not usually use the airport – continued along the same crumbling roads as before.

Beyond the Potemkin wall

In a speech to the regional LOCs, the Russian president discussed the official rationales underlying the World Cup infrastructure development program:

> "I want to bring attention to the timely and effective improvements of the host cities. I don't mean only those areas where the matches will take place, but also where the teams will live and train, where fans will visit. I will add that this task does not only apply for the championship, naturally. The point is not to create *shturmovshina* and *pokazukha*. Maintaining order and making improvements is the daily work of regional and municipal authorities, foremost in the interests of local residents." (Demchenko 2018)

Shturmovshina refers to a Soviet work practice from the era of centralized planning, where workers would compensate for delays by rushing to complete targets before the end of a planning cycle (Mokienko and Nikitina 1998). The resulting work was often considered poor quality and accomplished primarily to fulfill obligations on paper – a fitting description for the last-minute mega-event preparations in many countries. And *Pokazukha* comes from the verb *pokazat'* – 'to show' – and refers to the display of a superficial creation, generally for the purpose of deceiving a superior or an outsider. The idea of *pokazukha,* an artificial activity or façade that masks some less palatable realities, is an echo of the standard visual connotation of Potemkinism. Thus, speaking to regional organizers below him on the power vertical, the president employed both Soviet and Tsarist-era metaphors to underscore the need to accomplish legitimate work in proper timeframes, not only for the period of the World Cup but over the longer-term as well. Put another way, he did not want that nation to repeat familiar Potemkin practices.

The president, alongside every authority figure located along the power vertical, consistently repeated the idea that preparing for the World Cup would bring long-term benefits to the nation. In this case, however, the president's words were impossible to fulfill: this speech took place only six weeks before the opening of the World Cup, effectively setting an impossible goal for

local authorities. Unless these projects had already been completed, there was no time to accomplish anything of substance, and the only remaining option would be to fabricate the appearance of progress. In warning against Potemkin practices, the president was in actuality reinforcing Potemkinism.

Since Potemkinism focuses on the creation of superficial, controlled, and unproblematic images (Broudehoux 2017), a crucial question is what exists on the flipside of the supposedly perfect surface. Broudehoux (2015) discovers poverty and other threats to the host city's image underneath the surface, and identifies a number of strategies by which Potemkin projects attempt to render these dangers invisible. Many of these strategies were on display in Volgograd during the preparatory period. For instance, I was driving on the Aviators' Highway from the airport into Volgograd proper about a year before the World Cup. On one side of the road I saw a glassy shopping center and a gleaming new apartment tower (Figure 2), while on the opposite side a row of trees obscured a high concrete wall that ran unbroken for several city blocks.

Figure 2. Recently built apartment tower alongside the controlled FIFA Protocol Route, across the street from the wooden houses and unpaved roads of a poor district concealed by a wall and trees. The billboard shows stylized imagery representing the city, and the text reads, 'Volgograd is waiting for the 2018 Football World Cup in Russia.' Source: author.

When I finally discovered a way to get behind the wall, I found entire neighborhoods of old wooden dwellings on unmaintained roads. Periodically I saw a brick house or other recent construction, squashed on the same lot as an older house – an indication that some new money had come in – but mostly these neighborhoods had a poor, shabby feel (Figure 3). This was the *chastny sektor*, the private sector, and as the name indicates, the houses here were built on private land. These ramshackle neighborhoods were walking distance from the tourist center, and just a few minutes from a business district with high-rises towers and elite housing (Volgograd-City.ru 2019).

The *chastny sektor* was hidden by the high wall, and the wall was obscured by the line of trees, so it was impossible for the cars streaking by on the newly paved boulevard even to imagine these dilapidated neighborhoods. At the same time, visitors arriving to the city could not miss the polished towers and shopping malls on the opposite side. This is an example of the concealment strategy in Broudehoux's Potemkinism, referring to how these neighborhoods were hidden from view and inaccessible from the main road. Further, these communities were subject to Potemkin strategies of symbolic erasure: a three-year media analysis revealed that none of the images distributed by World Cup organizers featured pictures of this hidden Volgograd, nor were these dirt roads and ramshackle houses discussed by organizers at any level. This is unsurprising, of course, as no organizers do not usually share the less palatable sides of the host cities, but this absence highlights how Volgograd residents – the actual people who live in there – were symbolically erased from the World Cup-oriented presentation of the host city.

Figure 3. Typical housing in Volgograd's so-called private sector, concealed behind a wall from gleam- ing new apartment buildings and glassy shopping malls. this neighborhood was walking distance from the tourist city center. the tracks shown here are functional and trams service the area. While cars seemed common as well, the streets were unpaved and in poor condition, with piles of uncollected refuse at the intersections. Source: author.

More broadly, the city's renovation and beautification efforts represented an amalgamation of numerous Potemkin strategies as well. These efforts focused primarily – though not exclusively – on tourist spaces, resulting in the demolition of kiosks from central boulevards, the removal of

banners advertisements from building façades, and the installation of large football-themed decorations around the city (common strategies before many mega-events, not only in Russia). This beautification was an attempt to craft and distribute a "flawless and consensual representation of the city, at once efficient, modern, disciplined, and visually appealing," (Broudehoux 2015, 123). These efforts reflected Potemkinism through the obvious attempt to mask unappealing building facades with banners cheerfully promoting the World Cup (Figure 4). But there was also an element of locational Potemkinism in that certain areas of the city were chosen for attention, while others were kept out of sight. These uneven beautification projects were underscored by developments aimed at tourists and wealthier populations, such as those who might make use of the new airport, drive a hired car down the reconstructed highway, and stay in a new luxury hotel.

Finally, it is important to note the varying intended audiences for these Potemkin strategies: one moment, it could be the federal LOC engaging Potemkinism in order to garner approval from FIFA inspectors, while another moment could see the regional LOC constructing artificial realities for visiting federal officials. Another dimension could be the Potemkinisms on display in order to mask the living city from visitors, and still another could be the strategies used to persuade the residents themselves that World Cup development exists for the betterment of all.

Figure 4. World cup imagery covering a Volgograd building. From left to right, the kiosks in the fore- ground are a bakery, a florist, and a butcher. All were dismantled and removed as part of the urban beautification processes during the preparations for the World cup. Source: author.

Concluding a Potemkin exploration

Urban development for the World Cup was not simply a center-led Potemkin project, nor was it solely a neoliberal strategy for interurban differentiation or competition. Instead, it was Potemkin neoliberalism: a centralized project to develop peripheral cities, legitimized with rhetoric about a reorientation towards international and national flows of tourists and capital. But in the host cities, these centralized and standardizing processes collided with local, area-specific processes on the ground. These processes expressed themselves in the built environment as projects that ignored and propagated inequalities beneath the surface or behind a wall, while focusing on the display of beautiful Potemkin superficiality.

The convoluted urban developments in Volgograd reveal moments where centralizing and area-specific processes clashed, generating selective material improvements with uneven results. This was a common pattern seen during the preparations for the World Cup: a project originated in the center, funded by the federal government and implemented by the federal LOC, intending to bring a standardizing force to the peripheral host cities. Then, each project manifested itself in decentralized and area-specific ways, managed by regional authorities according to local contingencies, and resulting in local differentiation and, in many cases, specific inequalities.

For instance, the Aviators' Highway was a poorly executed project, beset by corruption, poor quality, and political intrigue. Although the Aviators' Highway was clearly in need of repair, it was not one of the city's primary roads; prioritizing this linkage meant that authorities overlooked other roads within the city that also needed attention, and that residents needed more. Put another way, both FIFA requirements and Russian federal priorities spawned a centralized development program that resulted in preferential treatment and cascading inequalities. This translated into uneven developments that were neither purely state-led nor strictly neoliberal, but rather something in between – something that can be understood as expressions of Potemkinism: By prioritizing exclusive forms of narrowly targeted development targeted at narrow classes of people – a new river road, the Aviators' Highway, or elite housing over existing neighborhoods – authorities directed attention to constructing a limited vision of their cities, at the expense of other, more egalitarian possibilities. Potemkinism expressed itself in Volgograd as a focus on relatively superficial aspects instead of more substantial projects that might have benefited a larger share of residents.

Still standing in the doorway of the empty Volgograd LOC, it occurred to me then how symbolic it was that these offices were in such private disarray. I shut the door, walked down the grand marble staircase, and back out into the city draped in World Cup banners and flags.

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