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## FIFA World Cup in Russia: Internal and International Aspects

Anna Maria Dyner

*With the International Olympic Committee excluding the Russian national team from the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, the importance for Russia's authorities of the FIFA World Cup is increasing. World Cup competition will be held from 14 June to 15 July 2018. The tournament will be used in Russia's internal politics, especially in the presidential campaign, and in relations with other countries to strengthen bilateral contacts and portray Russia as a country with a strong international position.*

Large international sports competitions are one of the most recognisable events in the world, so being a host country is highly prestigious. In Russia, sport has an important political and social dimension. Moreover, important events such as the Olympics or world championships are used to strengthen national pride and identity, and to distract from the everyday economic difficulties.

**The Importance of Sport in Politics.** The organisation of the World Cup will be used by Russia's authorities to mobilise support for incumbent President Vladimir Putin ahead of elections scheduled for 18 March.<sup>1</sup> Putin announced he would run for re-election on 6 December, one day after Russia was excluded from the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. The timing was not coincidence. He wanted, at least partially, to divert attention from the stinging IOC decision. Moreover, Russian media have tried to explain the decision as somehow connected to the international sanctions against the country, which they are not. The football championship, in turn, will be used to show the country's economic development and to highlight the growing importance of Russia in the international arena.

The first decisions regarding the organisation of the tournament taken at the governmental level came on 20 June 2013, when the Council of Ministers of the Russian Federation adopted a programme to prepare for and carry out World Cup 2018. According to this document, Russia's sports ministry was designated as the coordinating body. Although the ministry is formally overseen by former Olympian and Minister of Sport Pavel Kolobkov, from Putin's point of view, the guarantor is Vitaly Mutko, the deputy prime minister of Russia for Sport, Tourism and Youth Policy. He is one of the Russian president's closest advisors, having worked with him in the 1990s when Putin was mayor of St. Petersburg. The deputy prime minister has maintained his influential position despite accusations he helped organise a secret system of doping of Russian athletes (the IOC announced in a 5 December decision, that Mutko will be excluded from any participation in future Olympics). He is also the incumbent president of the Russian Football Association (and held this post in 2005–2009, when Russia bid for the 2018 World Cup) and, since 2009, a member of the FIFA Executive Committee. In 2014, he was the main organiser of the Winter Olympics in Sochi. However, world media reports often speculate that Russia won the bid for the Sochi Olympics and the upcoming World Cup through Mutko's shady dealings.

<sup>1</sup> For more, see: A. Legucka, "Challenges in Putin's Re-election Campaign," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 124 (1064), 15 December 2017.

Because of the lack of transparency surrounding the financing of the World Cup investments, opposition leader Alexei Navalny will use that situation in the presidential campaign to try to discredit Russia's current authorities. Independent analysts note the high costs associated with preparing for and hosting the World Cup and maintaining the sport infrastructure after the matches are over.

**Short-Term Economic Impulse.** For the Russian authorities, the economic dimension of the tournament is important. The investments related to the World Cup are presented as a success and indicator of the strength of Russia's economy. The authorities offer assurances that these World Cup investments will have long-term economic effects for the country. Putin already in his election campaign points to the modernisation of airports and rail network presumably associated with the preparations. The works also serve to divert public attention from the daily problems associated with the decline in Russians' real income in recent years.

It is important to note that the World Cup-related investments are some of the very few now implemented by the state, and economic impact estimates predict the event will add only 0.2% to Russia's GDP. According to Russian media, the hosting the World Cup is estimated to cost about RUB 680 billion (\$13.2 billion), of which RUB 390 billion will come from the federal coffers. In just 2017–2018, Russia will allocate around RUB 40 billion for the construction and reconstruction of stadiums, and around RUB 5 billion for security infrastructure. At the same time, the Russians hope that the tournament will be attended by 1.5 to 2 million foreign fans who will spend about \$3 billion. Even if that holds true, that money would only partially offset the expenditures.

**Security.** Russian media will use the World Cup to further a positive image of the state and present Russia as a friendly and safe country for foreigners. At the same time, the risk of terrorist attacks (partly as a result of Russia's involvement in Syria), means the authorities will be highly focused on security. The teams and members of their delegations will be protected by the Federal Security Service (FSB), while Ministry of Internal Affairs units, including the police and national guard, will be responsible for securing the matches. It can be expected that Russia will increase intelligence cooperation with the special services of other countries.

Russian police are planning to create a Police Cooperation Centre in Domodedovo (37 km from the centre of Moscow). During the World Cup, 5-8 officers from each participating state may be delegated to work with the Russian police. Moreover, the Russian side will seek to sign memoranda of cooperation with at least some police units from participating countries, which is common practice during competitions of this type. In addition, the Ministry of Emergency Situations will be responsible for securing sports facilities. The Russian authorities also have announced they have implemented additional measures, some related to counter-terrorist activities at facilities and tested in Sochi during the Winter Olympics in 2014 and the FIFA Confederations Cup in 2017.

**International Dimension.** The choice of Russia as host of World Cup 2018 aroused much controversy, deepened by its aggressive foreign policy, particularly in Ukraine—annexation of Crimea and subsequent war in Donbas. Many countries also raised sport-related issues, citing in particular the doping system organised by the Russian authorities. These accusations, later confirmed through an international investigation, led to the IOC's decision to temporarily suspend the Russian Olympic Committee's membership and to exclude Russia from the 2018 Winter Games (although individual Russian athletes may compete under the Olympic Flag if they meet strict criteria). The controversy was further exacerbated by the fact that Russian state-owned company Gazprom is one of only seven global FIFA partners, making the country a *de facto* FIFA sponsor.

Despite the controversy, World Cup 2018 will allow Russia to become the centre of interest of global media and public opinion for a time. The matches also take on important political significance, showing the significance of relations between the participating countries. In addition, the tournament offers many opportunities to organise meetings between high-ranking politicians, and not only from participating countries. Moreover, invitations to the opening ceremony or the final match comprise important elements of Russian diplomatic efforts. They will be used for specific political goals, such as strengthening relations with other countries, or even emphasising the importance of a given country to Russian foreign policy. Group stage matches already are offering such opportunities, with the Russian team playing Egypt and Saudi Arabia, key Middle East partners.

**Conclusions.** The organisation of the most important world football championship will be used by the Russian authorities as a demonstration of the efficiency and strength of the state in the social, economic and security spheres. Important parts of Putin's re-election campaign will be the economic benefits and social dimensions of hosting the World Cup. The tournament will also be used to hold a series of meetings at the international level, which (especially for ordinary Russians) will offer proof of the importance of Russia in the international arena. The World Cup has political significance for the leaders of states participating in the tournament. The participation (or refusal) and rank of representatives of a country in meetings will be legible touchstones in relations with Russia. Accepting an invitation to the tournament—even if issued by FIFA—may involve significant political costs, especially for representatives of states criticising Russia's aggressive foreign policy. The decisions whether to attend likely will be dependent on whether the representative's national team makes it to the final matches.