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**Nina Kramareva and Jonathan Grix**

## **‘War and Peace’ at the 1980 Moscow and 2014 Sochi Olympics: The Role of Hard and Soft Power in Russian Identity**

*Russia's (and the USSR's) use of sports mega-events (SMEs) makes this BRICS country (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) not only an outlier among emerging states, but also among key SME hosts generally. In this paper the authors argue that both the historic Moscow Olympics (1980) and the more recent hosting of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics provide evidence that Russia has, on both occasions, focused on geopolitical priorities using hard power (military might) at the expense of soft power acquisition. Further, the authors advance the notion that first and foremost both Olympics were used to pursue domestic soft power goals, which, again, makes Russia an outlier in terms of the political use of sports mega-events by states in the literature on this subject. The 1980 Olympic Games, therefore, in terms of their potential to generate soft power and national unity, turned out to be a mis-used opportunity for Russia. The authors explore the extent to which this is specific to Russia and whether the first Russian Olympics could provide valuable insight into the modern-day hosting of sports mega-events by Russia (2014/2018).*

**Keywords:** 1980 Moscow Olympics; 2014 Sochi Olympics; hard and soft power in Russia; domestic soft power; Olympic geopolitics; Russian identity

## Introduction

Not many states host the summer and winter Olympics *and* the FIFA World Cup, effectively the Crown Jewels of the sports mega-event (SME) world. Such ‘first-order’ events<sup>1</sup> are the biggest and most prestigious sporting events favoured by states for their potential to increase international prestige and ‘soft power’.<sup>2</sup> In general – and in the extant SME literature – the acquisition of ‘soft power’ is among the chief reasons why a state invests so heavily in a one-off, expensive, logistically complex sporting event.<sup>3</sup> ‘Soft power’ ought to be understood as part of a ‘politics of attraction’, that is a state strategy that does not only rely on coercion, but seeks international influence through persuasion.<sup>4</sup> The idea behind the concept, coined by Joseph Nye in 1990, shortly prior to the USSR’s collapse, is that ‘intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions’<sup>5</sup> would become more important in inter-state relations post-Cold War and this is clearly what has happened. States of all political hues have turned to soft power resources – of which sports mega-events are clearly one – to show-case their nations<sup>6</sup>, improve their image<sup>7</sup> and stimulate economic growth.<sup>8</sup> Those states which possess ‘hard power’, that is, military might and economic power and reserves, tend to attempt to use a combination of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power to achieve their aims (Nye terms this ‘smart power’)<sup>9</sup>. ‘Soft power’, in general, is wielded by a multitude of actors, ranging from language institutes or media outlets (for example, the British Council and the BBC in the UK), to major sports events such as the Olympics and student exchange programs. A distinction is to be made between ‘state-led’ and ‘organic’ soft power strategies,<sup>10</sup> with Russia a clear example of the former. Such a top-down, government-led strategy would see large-scale investments in areas capable of generating soft power, such as sports mega-events and increased tourism to a country.

In what follows, the authors trace the USSR and Russian state’s use of SMEs and seek to show through both historical and contemporary examples that Russia is an ‘outlier’ among key SME

hosts. That is, Russia does not fit into the category of states which seek to burnish their national image abroad through hosting a one-off sports spectacle, but rather they have pursued a strategy of *domestic soft power* goals while exhibiting a ‘hard power’ foreign policy, including going to war shortly before or during the sports event. The authors argue that the unique Russian SME strategy actually resulted in a loss of international prestige and soft power.

### **Historical Context**

In 1980 the USSR was preparing to host its first and only summer Olympic Games – an event of strategic political importance for the state leadership and a celebration of unparalleled openness and freedom in the yet closed society. As the last pre-Olympic year drew to a close and the whole country was in anticipation of the upcoming festivities, the Politburo made a decision to send troops to Afghanistan; thus, in 1979, the USSR was dragged into its final and fatal war. As a result, the Soviets’ greatest soft power opportunity was eclipsed by ‘a watershed event, delegitimizing Soviet policy, and Communism more generally, in the eyes of world public opinion’.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s the speculations abounded as to the actual reasons behind the USSR’s invasion. These ranged from the most obvious, such as the defence of the south-eastern border (security), support of the local communist government, messianism or sense of entitlement (ideology of Marxism, internationalist duty), to challenging the US dominance in the Persian Gulf and East Asia (neo-imperialism, expansionism),<sup>12</sup> and teaching a ‘hard-power’ lesson to unruly Eastern European satellite states by showing its strength in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

The 1980 Moscow Olympics and the invasion of Afghanistan, as well as the 2014 Sochi Olympics and Russian interference in Ukraine, are the USSR’s and Russia’s attempts to ‘assert itself as a global superpower’, while military campaigns are widely considered to fall within ‘historic Russian policy of empire’.<sup>14</sup> There is also an opinion that the Soviet invasion in 1979

was a pre-emptive measure with regard to the growing influence of the USA in Afghanistan, and accordingly was undertaken out of grounded security concerns rather than neo-imperialistic ambitions.<sup>15</sup> Taking into account the fact that first the USSR, and more recently, Russia, dramatically discredited its Olympic effort and neutralized attendant soft power gains, Urnov's following judgment appears partially just:

In the absence of serious hard and soft capabilities, the splashes of aggressiveness in Russian foreign policy and of anti-Western sentiments in domestic political life are unlikely to have any lasting effect. They are able, however, to generate extremely negative long-term consequences for the country.<sup>16</sup>

One of the motives for the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan - and the subsequent refusal to accept the US ultimatum to withdraw its troops or see the Olympics boycotted - may be the role of honour in Russia's self-concept. Since the end of the Cold War, the social constructivist stream of international relations has been most rigorous in furthering the cause-and-effect hypothesis between Russia's identity and its foreign policy and status.<sup>17</sup> According to social constructivism, identity is 'a reflection of an actor's socialization'.<sup>18</sup> National identity, therefore, is predicated on differentiation from significant others, who at the same time embody 'the meaningful context for the self's existence and development'.<sup>19</sup> In line with constructivism, an actor's definition of itself necessarily mirrors behaviour and attitudes of the significant others.<sup>20</sup> Social constructivism holds that interests, identities and states are 'constructed by historically contingent interactions'<sup>21</sup> and are dependent on 'historical, cultural, political, and social context'.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the 2014 Sochi Olympics, by putting Russia in the limelight, showed what the world really made of Russia.

Following this logic, status in Russia's case, 'denotes the position of a country on an international 'honor/prestige' scale [.....] which nowadays - taking into consideration the growing importance and popularity of the concept of a soft power - would rather be called

‘power- and influence-oriented prestige’.<sup>23</sup> While both status and honour are central to Russia’s identity, vividly more than for others,<sup>24</sup> status is *external*, dependent on recognition by important others and rests on ‘wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, socio-political organisation, and diplomatic clout’.<sup>25</sup> Honour, on the other hand, may be defined as ‘following a code of conduct associated with a status group’ and as such requires neither formal recognition nor is it conferred by important others. It is the internalized ‘universal need for self-esteem’<sup>26</sup> and in Russia’s case is derived/upheld by sticking to its self-determined international commitments. In this respect, Kalinosvsky’s observation about the context of Russian foreign policy in the late twentieth century may be instrumental in understanding the primary reasons for foreign invasion:

By the 1990s, Soviet foreign policymakers operated within a political order in which the USSR was the patron of a vast network of client states and Moscow’s support to Third World States and guerrilla movements was almost as much a part of the Soviet Union’s self-identity (at least in terms of foreign policy) as a victory in the Great Patriotic War.<sup>27</sup>

Although not defined as significant in traditional analyses of Moscow’s behaviour in Afghanistan, honour is seen by Tsygankov as a cornerstone of Russia’s geostrategic culture and as a driving force in its relations with the outside world and the West in particular.<sup>28</sup> It is precisely out of considerations of honour that Russia has been dragged into bloodletting and often futile conflicts and dismissed withdrawal for fear of losing face. In this regard, the Afghan war invites comparison with the First World War, another conflict of the twentieth century which precipitated the collapse of the empire, exposing the weaknesses of the state and funnelling revolutionary undercurrents to the surface.

Although in the first case it was Christianity that guided Russia’s actions and atheistic Marxist-Leninist values in the second, one aspect – honour – is apparent in both instances. Remarkably, it was the irrational pursuit of honour by hard methods with no observable hard

gains to it, which brought Russia disgrace and humiliation at least on these two occasions. On the other hand, Russia seems to wage honour-driven wars when it feels not only strong enough militarily, which was the case both in the First World War and Afghanistan (and in its recent involvement in Ukraine), but also when it is genuinely proud of its extant values and self-righteously believes that they deserve proliferation/ protection<sup>29</sup>— this is the essence of Russia's particular take on soft power.

Although continuously reappearing as a guiding rationale in Russian foreign policy, honour does not seem to benefit the nation.<sup>30</sup> Russian foreign policy, every so often punctuated by honour motivations, does not seem to bear fruit. While the First World War conditioned the fall of the Tsarist Empire and muddled the sense of national purpose, the Afghan war dispelled the illusion of domestic soft power. This was akin to the First World War which had a profound effect on Russians' self-image and what they made of their status in the world.<sup>31</sup> Hilali suggests that this 'left a deep dent and devastating impact in the Soviet psyche'.<sup>32</sup> Hence, there remains a tangible uneasiness with the psychological legacy of these wars and difficulty to accommodate them into national historical narratives. Unlike the epic Second World War, these were just 'episodes' on Russia's historical path which do not fit well into a glorious narrative of a great power.

Therefore, if the Soviet Union intended to raise its international status through hosting the 1980 Olympics, then gaining the upper hand in Afghanistan was a matter of preserving its honour and the status quo. The Soviet understanding of the status quo, in turn, has been summed up by Nikita Khrushchev in 1961 as 'expansionism'.<sup>33</sup> With an eye on its prestige and seeing international relations as a 'zero-sum' game, as many 'Realist' IR academics do, the Kremlin also feared that an Afghan precedent could have demonstrative effects and cause unrest in the socialist camp.<sup>34</sup> As a result, while both the Olympic Games and Afghanistan were 'aspects of Soviet government policy'<sup>35</sup> and important for Russia's self-image and identity, the

traditional considerations of honour, albeit in the end lethal for the state, prevailed. Equally, regarding Russia's position in Ukraine, Urnov opines that 'it is not a turn to an expansion strategy of a great power but rather a splash fight to protect "the last frontiers" of an overachiever (in Volgy's terms) deprived of soft power capabilities'.<sup>36</sup>

Considering that both hard and soft power is equally important nowadays for ensuring international recognition, it seems that the Soviet leadership intuitively longed for a balance between soft and hard power capabilities. The USSR soft power proposition in Afghanistan, and it was very much the same for the other converted socialist states, included heavy technical and capital assistance as well as wide-ranging infrastructural, educational and cultural programs.<sup>37</sup> Instead of facilitating growth these 'gestures of friendship' often resulted in 'penetration, manipulation, control and eventually exploitation for multiple purposes' of the client.<sup>38</sup>

The paradox then is that what the USSR saw as the preservation of its SP (soft power) was essentially a deployment of HP (hard power). It could be, therefore, that one of the reasons for the USSR's collapse was a misunderstanding of the two concepts by the ruling communist elites and thus an urge to maintain its soft power at all costs in the third world (economic aid) and preserve a SP illusion in Eastern Europe (military measures).<sup>1</sup>

In this paper the authors posit that the USSR ultimately failed because, by the 1990s, it had discredited all its soft power resources. The Soviets never managed to 're-establish their anti-imperialist credentials with the non-aligned states' in the Third World.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, for the USSR to exist, Moscow had to maintain international influence and domestic SP. While the

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<sup>1</sup> Although the majority in the Politburo was reluctant to send troops to Afghanistan with Brezhnev being particularly against the invasion, Andropov's reasoning that the USSR must intervene to maintain its influence in the region became decisive (see Savranskaya (2001) for the minutes of meetings of the Politburo).



very survival of the USSR, unlike the US or China for example, which are nation states, was based on the sufficient exercise of HP by its centre, the dismal state of affairs in 1991 in Moscow could not preclude an imminent collapse. As Dibb put it:

There is no doubt that the USSR's defeat in Afghanistan hastened its demise and exposed Moscow's corrupt ideology. The Soviet war in Afghanistan in effect marked the end of empire. And it contributed to a decline of communist ideology and geopolitical conviction in Moscow.<sup>40</sup>

By late 1986, the Afghanistan war had significantly impacted on Soviet domestic politics.<sup>41</sup> Anti-militarism became strong in non-Russian Soviet republics and 'took on a nationalistic character' in Moldavia, Central Asia, the Transcaucasus, and the Baltic region.<sup>42</sup> In fact, for non-Russians the war turned into a unifying symbol of their opposition to Moscow's rule.<sup>43</sup> This was a moment when the distinct anti-Russian identity started to take root in many Soviet republics, falling on particularly fertile ground, as one can see now, in Ukraine, Georgia and previously in Chechnya.<sup>44</sup> Susceptible to a sort of psychological omission, the Afghan war, nevertheless, deserves particular attention, since the processes triggered by it still have reverberations today, ironically precluding the spread and influence of Russian soft power in the Commonwealth of Independent States, which Russia sees as its 'sphere of privileged interests'.<sup>45</sup>

To sum up, the Afghan campaign made a substantial contribution to the moral decline of the army, degradation of the society where military was once an object of pride,<sup>46</sup> corruption of the founding principles and, subsequently, became a 'bleeding wound' and a sword of Damocles for the whole Soviet state.<sup>47</sup> Soviet intervention and ensuing failures to establish peace were unanimously condemned in the West and effectively put an end to détente. Further, it undermined Soviet prestige and endangered the forthcoming Olympic Games in Moscow. In fact, as official records testify, the intervention was the last resort, 'taken reluctantly and in

desperation, and not as part of a wider strategic challenge'.<sup>48</sup> What is missing, however, from the academic analysis of this affair is that first and foremost the USSR had to deploy hard power when its soft power suffered an inglorious defeat<sup>49</sup>, albeit a soft power supported by 'carrots' in the form of \$1.265 billion economic and \$1.250 billion of technical aid.

In this regard, it is interesting to investigate whether the connection between the US involvement in Afghan affairs a few years before the Moscow Olympics - an event of paramount political importance to the USSR – and Ukraine's revolutionary turn to the West, conspicuously coinciding with the Sochi Olympics, is purely accidental. Despite all the setbacks and failures for which the Kremlin is accountable, the USSR military effort was substantially offset by the USA that 'provided a total of \$2.15 billion worth of assistance to mujahidin groups between 1979 and 1988, and this assistance was matched by the Saudi monarchy'. This strategy, in turn, stemmed from 'a vengeful desire to make the Soviets suffer their own Vietnam'.<sup>50</sup>

Accidental or not, Moscow's involvement in Afghanistan and in the Ukraine, substantially damaged Russia's international image. Both military actions were inextricably and paradoxically linked to an event which was envisaged to do quite the opposite - elevate Russia's prestige to new heights. It seems, therefore, that when Russia was involved, the West viewed mega-events as a far more nuanced political battleground than previously thought<sup>51</sup>, and that long before such events assumed their modern status as 'a tool for political gain'.<sup>52</sup>

### **Political Controversy and Legacies of the 1980 Moscow Olympics**

Afghanistan invasion notwithstanding, the 1980 Moscow Olympics would still have become mired in political controversy due to a number of issues. There was a question of the two Chinas, Israel's and West Berlin's participation, which would have put Moscow into a politically explosive situation. With the unresolved issue between mainland China and Taiwan

over who would take part at the Olympics and Taipei's unwillingness to compromise, it seemed, that the People's Republic of China would be the one to go to Moscow. Moreover, the USSR's suspension of diplomatic relationship with Israel, and the equation of Zionism with racism in addition to Arab pressure on Moscow and a strong Jewish opposition domestically - all of these factors made Israel's participation problematic. These issues, however, resolved themselves without an official stance from Moscow, when both Israel and China, succumbing to the US led initiative, entered the ranks of the boycotters.<sup>53</sup>

As regards functions assigned to the Moscow Olympics by the leadership, they, likewise, were twofold - to become a major showcase for the country – 'crown the Brezhnev years with glory; [and to] bring that worldwide endorsement of Soviet foreign policy',<sup>54</sup> while rallying domestic support and reinforcing the communist elites' positions. It is the 'domestic' aims, if not peculiar to Russia, then definitely possessing a Russian twist,<sup>55</sup> that deserve particular attention.

In terms of international functions of the Moscow Olympics, they were in tune with the soft power goals of the modern-day mega-events and were well summarized by Willis:

...for the Kremlin, the Olympic Games in July are a vital political event. The Soviet leaders think success will shower their country with world legitimacy and approval, advertise the achievements of Lenin's revolution over the past 63 years, and "prove" the Soviet desire for peace.<sup>56</sup>

With the chances of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan dwindling as the Olympics drew closer, it seems that Washington was intent to 'reduce the size of the international stage on which [the USSR] hoped to show off the value of its political and social system'<sup>57</sup> and instead 'turn the Moscow event into a meaningless hypocritical spectacle'.<sup>58</sup> The boycott threats also purposefully targeted the domestic credibility of the Soviet leadership.<sup>59</sup> The Politburo, however, weighing up what was at stake for the US and its allies, felt that the Games would go

ahead as planned, inasmuch as the politics would not affect them the way they did in the end. Sport was almost a single arena where communist states stood on a par with capitalist societies and presented a rare opportunity to capture global attention by peaceful means, which inflated its strategic importance for the ruling elites. Thus, in contrast to the North American sports system where anarchy reigned supreme, one central feature of Soviet sport was its 'militarisation' or the military patronage of leading clubs and centralised control over sports development.<sup>60</sup> This also meant that sports federations had little say in determining the government's political agenda. Nor had they had any leverage in the Politburo's deliberations on the fate of the endangered Moscow Games. Therefore, the situation around the Olympics in the final months was as follows:

...to slam the Soviet authorities into the penalty box, they [international observers] argue would make a strong impact on a most sensitive area: the government's political desire to be seen (especially by its own citizens) playing gracious host to dozens of approving nations. So far, however, the Soviets do not regard the boycott threat as serious, according to dispatches from Moscow.<sup>61</sup>

The overall scepticism about the wide-scale concerted boycott was also prevalent in the West.<sup>62</sup>

The roots of Russian disbelief and their leadership priorities are summed up thus:

It is doubtful the Soviets thought President Carter would indeed boycott the Olympics, and if he did, Afghanistan simply was more important than the Games. They probably knew that they could count on the IOC to hold the Moscow award, and on the West to react to Afghanistan the way it reacted to Czechoslovakia by calling for major arms control and détente.<sup>63</sup>

Considering the boycott unlikely, Russia was still prepared for the worst case scenario. On the other hand, it appears that the Olympic Games, although firmly established as a key vehicle of diplomacy and political leverage, were not yet regarded as an all-or-nothing affair.

Consequently, the 1980 Olympic Games became a victim of false expectations, with neither side being realistic about the tenacity of its counterpart's position and as a result not willing to compromise. The immediate prospects of the boycotted Olympics as well as wider political legacies were described by Kanin:

Without the US in Moscow, the Games would turn into a large-scale *Spartakiade*, or a simple Soviet-East-German meet. The Soviet populace might draw together in a patriotic reaction, but would also be aware of how seriously Afghanistan affected East-West relations. Any large-scale international support for the US move would add to the embarrassment and reduce the political legitimacy the Soviets hoped to gain from hosting the Olympic spectacle.<sup>64</sup>

It is obvious that without US participation and with the other countries following suit, the 1980 Moscow Olympics were relegated to the second rank of sports events.<sup>65</sup> Yet this is only true where the sports/competitiveness component is concerned. Given the political fracas with the Games becoming a pinnacle of the US-USSR confrontation so far and other repercussions looming (rhetorical heat boiling into actual militant conflict),<sup>66</sup> the Games lived up to be a true mega-event with all the qualities pertaining to it nowadays.

Thus, under the realities of the Cold War, hard power concerns came well before the prospects of soft power gains. The tables have turned since, however, with no country willing to risk the Olympic effort. The 1980 Moscow Olympics and Afghanistan invasion, indeed, invite comparisons with the 2014 Sochi Olympics and conflict in Ukraine in terms of their timing, implications for national psyche and nation-building. Despite apparent similarities, the two cases differ in some substantial points: While Russian intervention in Afghanistan encountered outright international opposition, resulting in 65 countries boycotting the Games,<sup>67</sup> it also received a cold response domestically. The annexation of Crimea and the Russian role in the Ukrainian conflict, on the other hand, found countrywide support, due to strong historical-cultural associations and the perceived strategic importance of Ukraine. (Although

Afghanistan was viewed as a necessary political step, unlike Ukraine it did not feature as strongly in the sphere of Russian interest and did not constitute a part of the nation's self-concept and national identity). Both Olympics spurred a patriotic sentiment among the domestic population. Although mired in controversy, (human rights issues, gay rights as well as the authoritarian nature of the regime are only recurring themes),<sup>68</sup> they still added to the improvement of the country's image internationally. The Sochi case, however, is noteworthy since it provides an example of all-embracing military and sports patriotism intertwined. Notwithstanding the international reaction, the two events seemed to have united Russia to such an extent that one cannot help but wonder: Have the stars aligned themselves accidentally or have they been (re-)aligned by some ruthless geopolitical hand? In other words, the Russian leadership seemed to turn the stalemate to its advantage at least in the short term. The West-written script for the Ukraine brought hard-power gains for Russia, albeit at the cost of its soft power designs. Thus, as in 1980 Russia once again proved that hard power concerns remain far more resilient than soft power illusions.

In terms of sanctions, it is not the first time the USA used its leverage against Russia in close time proximity to the Olympics. In 1980, the year of the Moscow Olympics, to make a political point about the invasion of Afghanistan, the US introduced a series of economic and cultural sanctions.<sup>69</sup> They included the embargo on grain deliveries, cuts on high-technology industrial equipment sales, postponement of strategic-arms-limitation treaty (SALTII) ratifications, as well as restrictions on scientific and cultural exchanges.<sup>70</sup> These measures, however, according to studies published by the US News and World Report appeared to have a profound negative effect on the US stakeholders while little influence on Russian behaviour. Thus, US grain exports were reduced from an expected \$4.8 billion to \$1.5 billion with Washington having to resort to approximately \$3billion government purchases to compensate the farmers.<sup>71</sup> Russia was quick to find alternative suppliers such as Argentina and Brazil. It

also found producers of high-tech equipment in Western Europe and Japan, with the US subsequently losing two-thirds of an expected \$150 million.

Taking into account the stance of Russian firms on Afghanistan, the experts were inclined to conclude that Carter's actions, with most of the Western European allies refusing to follow suit, with the likes of France 'unwilling to sacrifice both continental détente and their commercial links with the USSR and Eastern Europe',<sup>72</sup> had rather negative short-term repercussions for the US than the USSR, failing to force Russia to cease its campaign in Afghanistan.<sup>73</sup>

### **War and Sport – Sochi as a Recipe for Russia's 'Greatness'**

Since Putin's rise to power and a renewed significant emphasis on Russia's international stature, Russia has begun its reintegration into the shifting world order, first as a normal power and later, hurt by what it saw as Western arrogance and contempt, from the more assertive position, Russia began playing host to a string of SMEs (Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games, The 2018 Football World Cup). Gigantism, the demonstration of political stature, and the pursuit of national greatness are all pertinent; they all show direct continuity with Soviet tradition, the vitality of the Soviet legacy, and the value attachments of the incumbent Russian leadership.

Apart from a viable national idea, territorial integrity is among the prerequisites of Putin's Russia;<sup>74</sup> accordingly the second Chechen war and the Sochi Olympics must be scrutinized as two formative episodes in Russian ascendancy to self-proclaimed great power status. The Chechen crisis has been traditionally endorsed as Putin's critical victory in prevention of the state's breakdown, a symbolic moment when Russia finally started to raise from its knees.<sup>75</sup> It is the second Chechen war where the narrative of Putin-the strong statesman- originated. <sup>76</sup>The Sochi Olympics, on the other hand, from the outset were

interwoven into the storyline of modern Russia, and arguably envisaged to become a birthplace of a new Russian heroic national idea, whatever concrete characteristics it might take.

While Russia's involvement in Chechnya was a culmination of all the grudges simmering within the state such as – 'the threat of disintegration, the perceived penetration and subversion by foreign forces, the weakening of state structures as a result of criminality and terror, and Russia's basic inability to stand up for itself and secure its core national objectives'<sup>77</sup> – and could be viewed as an example of defensive politics, the Sochi Olympics, taking place in a different geopolitical environment and with Russia possessing a different set of capabilities, should be assessed as a distinctive assertive geopolitical act.

Moreover, both Caucasus and mega-events, the former since its absorption into the Russian empire in the 18th century<sup>78</sup> and the latter quite recently, although representing hard and soft power politics respectively, constitute what is seen in Russia as fundamentals of its great power status. To this end, speaking of significance of the region (ironically being a host for the first Russian mega-event) for the Russian geopolitical imagination, Blank posits:

Since the elites' understanding of Russia as a great power rests at least in part on Moscow's ability to form a sphere of influence (or to use Carl Schmitt's term, a "*Grossraum*") in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the western borderlands of the Soviet Union, successful secession in the North Caucasus would call into question the entire domestic and foreign policy project of the state.<sup>79</sup>

Calling for the much greater involvement of the USA in the Caucasus and coherent inclusion of it into a sphere of its strategic interests under the pretext of Russia recovering its unrelenting neo-imperial ambitions and thus, a potential threat to European stability, Blank opines:

Ultimately, a Russian empire, even a watered-down neo-colonial one, is incompatible not only with democracy and genuine prosperity of Russia, the former Soviet republics and Europe, such ersatz empire is also incompatible, as the North Caucasus shows, for any chance of peace inside Russia.<sup>80</sup>



Subsequently, Chechnya also activated a vulnerable ‘besieged fortress’ mentality or a tendency to attribute all domestic miseries to the intrigues and scheming of foreign enemies.<sup>81</sup> Hence stems a heightened suspicion and pro-active (or expansionist as the cases of South Ossetia and Crimea have demonstrated) foreign policy towards Western-leaning ex-Soviet republics, such as Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>82</sup>

Ironically, secessionist sentiment in Chechnya<sup>83</sup> and strengthening of self-identification as a separate ethnic entity in Ukraine<sup>84</sup> were brought to pass by the ignominious performance of the Soviet army in Afghanistan, disillusionment in the all-mighty nature of the state and, as a result, the Politburo loosing grip on the control levers in society.

Although Chechnya and Ukraine differ across structural characteristics (one is the federal state of Russia, the other – a sovereign state), Russian actions appear motivated by a similar logic. The republics’ pursuit of independence - political, economic or cultural-, apart from posing a serious threat for Russian concrete geostrategic interests (Chechnya is rich in oil<sup>85</sup> and the Ukraine, according to Brzezinski,<sup>86</sup> is the only remaining vestige of Russian European identification), gave a painful psychological punch to a deeply offended convulsing colossus.<sup>87</sup> Feeling mistreated, fooled, its prestige and status encroached upon and threatened by such audacious decolonisation impulses (physical and cultural),<sup>88</sup> Russia found strength in its miseries and took an assertive stance.<sup>89</sup>

However, if in Chechnya the liberation movement was successfully done away with and a ‘Chechenisation’ campaign is in full swing,<sup>90</sup> then in Ukraine as very mildly put by Sakwa ‘the predominant model of Ukrainian nation-building predicated on separation from Moscow’ is in motion.<sup>91</sup> In fact, there is a relentless political institutionalization of an anti-Russian identity taking place.<sup>92</sup> The law ‘on Holodomor’ by the Ukrainian parliament, *Verkhovna Rada*, in 2006, the glorification of Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian political activist, and the provision of an equal status to the OUN/UPA soldiers and the Red Army Second World

War veterans are but a few examples of the Ukrainian leadership self-serving short-sightedness and lack of cultural acumen, which, arguably, not only contribute towards political animosity between two countries, but are undeniably at the roots of the civil conflict in Ukraine.

Chechnya (second operation) was the first moment since the fall of the USSR, which united Russian publics in patriotic mood. According to Hughes, ‘the conflict in Chechnya could be understood as a shift from imperial disengagement to the rediscovery of imperial nerve in Russia, first under Yeltsin, and then Putin’.<sup>93</sup>

This observation is highly valuable as it establishes precisely the roots and timing of the re-emergence of Russian post-modern imperial/great-power ambitions. Hence stems the character of Russian internal nation-building process, revival of geopolitics, expediency of power centralisation and outlines of national ideology to be harnessed.<sup>94</sup> Instrumental for understanding a connection between the legacy of the Chechen crisis and a ‘new’ assertive Russia is Calzini’s following comment:

It is symptomatic that after the Beslan tragedy, Putin expressed nostalgia for the Soviet past, when Russia was seen, in his words, as “an impressive state and a great power”. Reference to the strong state returned with a new rhetorical emphasis demanded by the deliberately dramatized atmosphere in an appeal to the values of militant patriotism. The need for military opposition to what was presented as a threat to the survival of the Russian nation was used to justify a decisive step in the process of consolidating state structures.<sup>95</sup>

While Afghanistan put an end to the ideology of a crumbling empire, Chechnya is seen as a trigger for an ideology of a rising empire.

In 2008 Dannreuther and March speculated whether using Chechnya as a pretext for building an authoritarian ‘self-assertive’ nationalist state would have negative repercussions for the Russian-West relations. The history is repeating itself in the aftermath of the first Russian mega-event with the contagious domestic effect of soft and hard power politics intertwined and an ensuing return of Russia – West confrontation.

Pursuit of neo-imperialist policies in the post-Soviet space and the North Caucasus as well as consistency of foreign policy objectives may be put down to the values passed down to the conservative and centrist elites (with Putin being an illustrious representative of the latter camp)<sup>96</sup>. It may also be a sign of Russian general political culture,<sup>97</sup> which most Western pundits see as ‘inherently aggressive, expansionist and imperialist, but ... also persistent and irreversible’.<sup>98</sup> Such arguments are in line with a rationalist view of international relations, where interests and identity are regarded as given and neither flexible, nor susceptible to change due to social interaction/participation in the international system.<sup>99</sup> Yet they might also be explained by what Pipes and Pierson refer to as a path dependency, whereby the strategic decisions of the present only repeat the successful one’s of the past.<sup>100</sup> These propositions, on the other hand, fall within the social constructivist interpretation of appropriation of the historical identities and definition of national interest:

At the core of the argument is that the past national “self” forms a historical reference point in elite evaluations of current competing national self-images. Elite collective memories of the high and low points of the country's past create aspirations to replicate the best and avoid the worst in that history. These historical aspirations provide a benchmark of historical validity against which current national self-images are evaluated.<sup>101</sup>

War has repeatedly proved a fail-safe political currency for Putin whenever he felt his legitimacy questioned or approval rates drop below acceptable.<sup>102</sup> During the second Chechen war, which gave him political visibility, official media created an ‘image of a man of order, a statesman with no qualms’.<sup>103</sup> Playing an ‘integrity’ and ‘security’ card, emphasizing the imminent danger of country’s disintegration lest he was elected president, Putin thus rallied humiliated, poverty-stricken population behind the flag for the first time.<sup>104</sup> Putin’s political persona and the official role played in Russian politics evolved over time, contingent in immediate circumstances and strategic needs and essentially borrowing from the reservoir of tried-and-tested Russian political myths.<sup>105</sup> From the saviour of the nation from extremism,

Islamism and disintegration in the wake of his presidency<sup>106</sup> to a balanced pragmatic economic reformer during his first tenure, to a ‘collector of the Russian lands’ and purveyor of Greater Russia, - Putin’s public image has been consistent in one crucial respect. Putin’s political credibility early on as a presidential candidate in 1999<sup>107</sup> and legitimacy quite recently has been closely interlinked with his ability to deliver - both in resolution of the armed conflicts and in putting on a mega-event. Both instances are emblematic of his rule- they are both symbolic extravagant political shows with a very high price tag attached- both financial and human.

However disparate the causes and rationale for war and a mega-event might be - with the former being a manifestation of realpolitik or neo-imperial policy<sup>108</sup> whereas the latter allegedly aiming at a soft power boost - both events, nevertheless, were instrumental in the construction and legitimisation of Putin’s political persona.<sup>109</sup> They also offer a pool for militant and sports patriotism, which by government’s sleight of hand, became defining for nation-building in Russia nowadays.<sup>110</sup> In 1996 Sestanovich assumed that under conditions of social and political uncertainty ordinary Russians find consolation in ‘geotherapy’. Following factors condition such a psychological escapism:

...that Russians support an expansionist policy to which leaders must respond, that the Russian elite retains an imperial mindset, that Russian leaders are preoccupied with issues of (lost) prestige and status.<sup>111</sup>

Therefore, the second Chechen war (and quite recently the Crimean affair) and the Sochi Olympics, living up to these expectations and predictably driving up the approval rates of the president,<sup>112</sup> could be understood as initial triggers for the post-modern Russian ideology. In fact, direct association of the figure of Putin with the Sochi Olympics, his high visibility during the opening ceremony, as well as perhaps most importantly his continuous proposals to make sport part of the national idea and cultivation of his athletic image, have become the most identifiable characteristic of the nascent official national ideology. The tendency bears

resemblance to the state of affairs in Soviet sport as described by Grant:

The impression produced is that the development and success of Soviet physical culture and sport owed entirely to the efforts of the “great Lenin”. Symptomatic of the Lenin cult and its imputations, Soviet sport and physical culture had come to be considered as indispensable element of Marxist-Leninist doctrine.<sup>113</sup>

Building a logical causation between Putin’s persona and his identification with Russia and its reemerging greatness and national identity, Foxall likewise argues that its evolution could be traced by a closer look at Putin’s presidency.<sup>114</sup> Throughout his tenures he played varying geopolitical roles, exploiting the themes and nodal points pervasive over time in Russian geopolitical imagination. He used to be a ‘man of action’ or Russian James Bond, a ‘macho’, an ‘environmentalist’, a ‘father of the nation’.<sup>115</sup> The list is not exhaustive. One characteristic, however, has been recurrent throughout all his representations, which is ‘militarized and sexualized masculinity’.<sup>116</sup>

In this paper the authors argue, though, that since 2007, when the Winter Olympics were awarded to Sochi, a new script has been added to Putin’s image portfolio and the Russian national identity narrative. Putin started to appear publicly as a fit athlete and Russia was repeatedly endorsed as a great sports nation. Mega-events are instrumental in this regard and deserve particular attention in terms of their role in symbolizing Russia’s evolving geopolitical aspirations. After ‘Russia’s long “revolutionary decade” – 1991 – 2004 – [when] Russia remained unsatisfied with its new status, but its grand strategy took neither a revanchist nor an accommodating turn’,<sup>117</sup> Russia finally adopted conspicuous soft power mechanisms in order to reclaim its former status.

Ever since his entrance into upper echelons of power Putin has not only explicitly identified himself with Russia – the state and Russia – the metaphysical construct, he continuously endeavoured to resuscitate public confidence in the state structures and their infallibility.<sup>118</sup> On a more intangible ideological level, the images of Putin and the qualities

they evoked, such as strength, determination, health, confidence, etc. were to enter the national psyche as a template of a new exemplary man, simultaneously giving rise to patriotism interchangeable with pride in the country evoked by confidence in the visionary charismatic leader.<sup>119</sup> Such an image of Putin bears close resemblance to a perfect Soviet hero, the New Soviet Person – ‘clean and smart, healthy and politically astute... [ready for] self-sacrifice and [in] control over one’s emotions’.<sup>120</sup> In fact, Putin *is* an incarnation of a hypothetical Soviet hero in the context of contemporary Russia. That is, his early canonical biography neatly fits the prototype formulated by Mertin of a ‘well-educated, physically healthy citizen from a simple working family, leading normal life, experiencing the unique conditions of Communist society to fulfil [his] most sincere goals to serve [his] country and contribute to building a communist society’. Putin’s invariable political image, likewise, unfolds as scripted, if only with the omission of communist parlance.<sup>121</sup> Notably, it was believed that in case Putin had decided to run for the president in 2018 corresponding to the aspirations of Russian people these previously emphasized qualities would have been replaced by ‘softer’ humanistic ones, that is ‘instead of a military leader will come a wise patriarch’.<sup>122</sup>

To an international observer visual representations of Putin send an unambiguous geopolitical message of Russia laying claims at great power. In this regard, Putin, bearing in mind historical importance of military prowess for national unity, has particularly relied on militant patriotism,<sup>123</sup> generated by the second Chechen campaign to legitimize his decisions at the beginning of his presidential tenure.<sup>124</sup> This was the period charged with what Eichler hails as ‘militarized masculinity’ in official representations of Putin.<sup>125</sup> From the mid-2000s, when Russia started to show visible signs of economic recovery and gradually regained confidence in its territorial integrity and internal stability, achieved through whatever means available to the ruling elites, there was a shift from militant nationalism to great power patriotism and proactive foreign policy.<sup>126</sup> This was when a string of international sporting

events – the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the 2018 FIFA WC among them - entered the government's agenda.<sup>127</sup> Widely seen as Putin's pet projects in the West, from the elite perspective they, nevertheless, marked a significant shift from military concerns - however important for national self-concept – to 'performative politics of attraction'.<sup>128</sup> Such a voluntary transition from hard power pursuits to soft power projects, though forced by emergency, were among other things an attempt to signal Russia's desire for peaceful coexistence with the West, albeit not on the humiliating terms of the 1990s but on more equal terms of the twenty first century, where Russia has a clear voice as well.<sup>129</sup> Being part of an endeavour to redefine Russian identity in the international politics, they were also a catalyst for domestic identity discourse. Current trends in Russia to exploit sporting success and SMEs as a foundation for a viable national idea and to resuscitate patriotism, have their roots in the USSR's novelty of nation-building around sport.<sup>130</sup> Regarding the identity crisis, with the demise of the USSR, Russia found itself in comparable circumstances to those of the young Soviet state almost a century before. Albeit brought about by different structural conditions, the principle likeness lies in the repudiation of the predecessor state's moral philosophy and labours to map out new reference points. According to Grant, 'physical culture was one way in which the Bolsheviks attempted to "cultivate a new culture"'.<sup>131</sup> If, however, for the Soviet elite the withering away of the past was a plus and a chance to build a new world, Russia for at least a decade was trying to make sense of the world into which it had been thrust. With no grand idea in sight and beset by protracted moral fatigue, modern Russia started appropriating successful projects from the different epochs, hence its attempts to reinvigorate sport and the space program from Soviet times. Based on the findings of the Levada Centre, Dubin explains why Vladimir Putin's extensive drawing from the Soviet epoch is particularly visible in sport:

The research proves that current Russian collective identity is both weak and based on nostalgia. It is determined by the collective identity of the Soviet type and period and a

symbolic ‘connection’ between now and ‘the past’ is the image of Putin. Remarkable in this regard is the reintroduction of the Soviet state symbols at the turn of the century, as well as his recent attention to the ‘mass physical culture’ (as a contrast to ‘elite’ fitness clubs), his public claims of the last decade to return Russian sport its former state importance and world prestige.<sup>132</sup>

Although after the Sochi Olympics Russian foreign policy<sup>133</sup> and its domestic narrative have been radically readjusted and the return of the ‘besieged fortress’ syndrome significantly brought back militant rhetoric, Putin stuck to patriotism as the unifying force, officially naming it national idea in 2016.<sup>134</sup> Mega-events in this respect neatly fall within the Soviet tradition of creating ‘a ‘togetherness’ and patriotic feeling’ and most importantly, ‘linking members of the public, through sport, with politics, the Party and, of course, the nation’s leader’.<sup>135</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article the authors have provided evidence for the claim that the Soviet Union’s/Russia’s hosting of the Olympics served *not* simply as an external soft power strategy, but first and foremost was used for domestic soft power. The latter incorporates the shoring up of state legitimacy vis-à-vis the citizenry and the act of being chosen as an Olympic host and its impact on the development of a national narrative. The national narrative has traditionally incorporated the most impressive of both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ achievements of the nation and its outstanding representatives from various historical periods. Among such nation defining accomplishments in the twentieth century were the victory in the Great Patriotic War and the 1980 Summer Olympic Games. While the sacred status of the victory is clear, the still enduring spiritual and emotional value of the 1980 Olympics for the post-Soviet people make it exceptional among other Games and warrants separate attention. In this paper the authors also discussed (based on the examples of the Afghan and Chechen wars) the importance of military performance for the Russian self-concept and its unifying potential. Accordingly, while the dismal show in Afghanistan precipitated a collapse of the Soviet Empire, the success of the second Chechen



operation brought about a ‘rediscovery of the imperial nerve in Russia’. Although the Chechen war is part of the national narrative, it does not feature as prominently as the Sochi Olympics. Whereas the former triggered militant nationalism, the Olympics became associated with the transition to a more inclusive, national great power patriotism. Initially envisaged as a soft power vehicle, they were to become a symbol both *of* and *for* a new Russia – an image marker internationally but chiefly a catalyst of *domestic soft power* and national narrative. Importantly, the Games also signalled a persistent continuity of the Russian national character and narrative: Being endorsed as a common cause they became a pinnacle (including the resources and effort spent) of grandeur and triumph.

It is important to note that such conclusions are not easily transferable to other cultural contexts, although Russia can be placed among a group of states that have or are attempting a ‘state-led’ soft power strategy (others would be China and South Korea).<sup>136</sup> A state-led approach to soft power acquisition usually involves an investment in domestic soft power and the bolstering of a nation’s identity.

## Notes

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