

Russian Aggression Against Ukraine and World Football:
An Analysis of the Impact of the War in Ukraine on
Russia's Foreign Policy Strategies Regarding World
Football.

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Abstract:

This thesis delves into the interplay between Russia's foreign policy strategies, namely soft power and public diplomacy, and world football. It aims to unravel the links between Russia's foreign policy since the Soviet Union's dissolution and its engagement in world football. The central hypothesis posits that Russia's strategies relying on football encountered significant disruptions following its aggressive actions against Ukraine. Drawing on Joseph Nye's concept of *soft power* and Edmund Gullion's *public diplomacy*, the research traces Russia's ascendancy as a wielder of soft power globally, particularly before the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict. However, Russia's credibility and trust, crucial for soft power, eroded as military interventions in its neighbouring countries unfolded. Analyzing football's role in Russia's strategy, the study elucidates how the sport provided a platform for political engagement, economic ties, and diplomatic relations, contributing to Russia's soft power. Yet, the invasion of Ukraine disrupted this alignment, given that Russian soft power is an extension of the Russian State, and will be surpassed by hard power strategies. This led to irremediable repercussions to Russian football diplomacy, such as club selloffs, contract cancellations, and suspension of Russian teams by FIFA and UEFA. Employing qualitative analysis, the research examines texts, speeches, official documents, press releases, and scholarly works, to shed a light on Russia's sports diplomacy endeavours and foreign policy strategies. This research holds significance in bridging the gap between political science and sports studies, offering insights into the dynamics of how sports can both fuel and hinder foreign policy efforts. It aims at increase the understanding of the complexity of using sports as a diplomatic tool and reveals the need for integration between sports studies, political science, and international relations in academia.

Keywords: Football, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Russia, War in Ukraine

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List of Abbreviations:

AFC: Asian Football Confederation

BRICS: A grouping of the world economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

FIFA: Fédération Internationale de Football Association - International Association Football Federation

IOC: International Olympic Committee

MSE: Mega Sporting Event

UEFA: Union of European Football Associations

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics - Soviet Union

USA: United States of America

WC: FIFA World Cup

1. Introduction

On February 28th, 2022, four days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, FIFA and UEFA released a joint statement suspending all Russian teams, whether national representatives or club teams, from participating in football competitions indefinitely.¹ This decision was taken in accordance with the IOC's recommendations, issued on the 24th, 25th, and 28th of February, urging sports events organizers and International Sports Federations to not invite or allow the participation of athletes representing Russia or Belarus.² The reason behind including Belarus together with Russia is that Belarus has historically been one of Russia's closest political allies³ and one of the few countries that openly supports Russia's invasion of Eastern Ukraine.⁴

For world football, the suspension of Russia from international competitions (including qualifying matches for the 2022 World Cup), is not an unprecedented event. Throughout the years' countries such as Mexico, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe, among others, have all received short suspensions by FIFA for political interference in the affairs of their national team. In 1992, FIFA started a 6 year-ban on Yugoslavia, amidst the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), where the Serbian-led government was later judged and found guilty of crimes against humanity. Before that, in the 1960s, most international sports organizations came together to ban Apartheid South Africa,⁵ –it must be noted, that according to scholars at the time, most

¹“FIFA/UEFA suspend Russian clubs and national teams from all competitions” *FIFA Media Release*, February 28, 2022. <https://www.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/qatar2022/media-releases/fifa-uefa-suspend-russian-clubs-and-national-teams-from-all-competitions>

²“IOC EB recommends no participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials”, *IOC Media Release*, February 28, 2022 <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-eb-recommends-no-participation-of-russian-and-belarusian-athletes-and-officials>

³“Belarus and Russia”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, <https://mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral/russia/>

⁴Chad De Guzman. “Why Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Led to Sanctions on Belarus”. *Time* - February 25, 2022. <https://time.com/6151347/belarus-russia-ukraine/>

⁵Sanya Mansoor. “These Are the Countries FIFA Has Ever Banned From the World Cup.” *Time* - November 17, 2022. <https://time.com/6234776/countries-banned-world-cup-russia/>

prominently James Riordan, the country that most outspokenly condemned Apartheid South Africa's participation in sports, and led the international ban, was the USSR.⁶

It cannot be denied, however, that Russia had become a far greater participant in world football than any of the other suspended federations. Being the 5th country to win the most titles in UEFA, where it had representatives on every board, besides being a major sponsor of European football, and having just hosted the previous World Cup in 2018.

But how did Russia become so intertwined with football? If one looks historically, while countries like the United States and England maintained sports in the realm of leisure affairs for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, in what many authors define as 'sports for the sake of sports', this was not the case with post-Tsarist Russia, as physical culture was seen as one of the many political pillars of Soviet society. During that period, sports were considered to have physical, mental, cultural, and militaristic dimensions. They were seen as ways to keep youth engaged as well as to maintain large portions of society fit, healthy, and ready to fight in a possible war. What is more, sports became a way for the countries behind what came to be known as the '*Iron Curtain*' to participate in the international arena. The Soviet Union, as well as East Germany, and Yugoslavia all developed strong sports programs, which showed results at both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.

With the growing popularity of football (among those practicing it, as well as those watching it), mainly due to its simple rules, dynamic matches, and close connection between teams and supporters, it did not take long for political leaders to see the potential that the teams and players had in being used as 'cultural ambassadors' of the Soviet Union, which in turn only increased the popularity both of the sport and of the Communist system as a whole.

However, as the Soviet Union faced its crisis and eventual dissolution in the 1990s, football entered a period of abandonment, losing much of the funding that before came directly

⁶James Riordan and Arnd Kruger. *European Cultures in Sport*. (Bristol: Intellect, 2003), 101

from the State. This led to the private acquisition of Russian football clubs, mainly by the new political and economic class that emerged out of the period, the *oligarchy*.

Oligarchs, businessmen who rapidly accumulated wealth in the period of privatization that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, such as Russian-Israeli entrepreneur Roman Abramovich, rapidly entered the realm of world football, through full ownership of clubs, like Abramovich's *Chelsea Football Club*, bought in 2003, or by having shares in teams, mainly in England, but also in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Monaco, for example. Football proved not only to be a profitable enterprise, as it is the most lucrative sport in the world, but also a way to create further business ventures, a network between other owners, investors and related companies, as well as creating a positive association between the owner, and the team itself. Abramovich is a prime example of that, a figure still beloved by both players and fans at Chelsea.

The oligarchs were not the only group to understand the potential of football, in fact, once Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister of Russia in 1999, and the period of unbridled privatizations came to a halt, the Russian State bought back many companies, especially those in strategic sectors, such as energy. Companies like Gazprom, and Sibneft (previously owned by Abramovich), were re-nationalized, and quickly entered the football scene as well. Mostly through ownership deals inside Russia, but later as major sponsors of teams and competitions across Europe. For companies, as well as the benefits already discussed, sponsorship deals in foreign markets helped to create a familiarization with the public, as well as a 'softer' image, tied to cultural affairs, rather than the negative association that naturally comes with fossil fuels companies.

Furthermore, it was not only through economic deals that Russia created an attachment to world football, but by following the Soviet tradition of politically valuing sports, the country hosted two Mega Sporting Events (MSE) in the span of four years: the Winter Olympic Games,

Sochi 2014, and the FIFA World Cup in 2018, in what were considered two successful events, both in organization, and in attendance and viewership, to the point that Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea, mere hours after the closing ceremony of Sochi, were not enough to neither damage the legacy of Sochi 2014, or warrant the losing of hosting rights of the 2018 World Cup.

In fact, those events were politically used for this very reason, in order to create a more outwards reaching Russia, that values its place in the international arena, and welcomed the world to an “open, friendly, and hospitable”⁷ Russia, in the words of Vladimir Putin at the opening ceremony of the 2018 World Cup.

At this ceremony, Putin continued by declaring that football has an ability of uniting the world “which cannot be affected by different language, ideology or faith”, and that, in Russia, football fans might be able to “meet new friends – people with whom they share the same values.”⁸ This is significant, because MSE in general are an opportunity for political leaders not only to present their countries as organizers and facilitators of an event, but also to show the world the values that rule that nation, as well as to promote its political agenda.

While, at first, those economic and political ties can be seen as not intrinsically connected, they are, in fact, part of a bigger strategy of foreign policy making, attached to the concepts of *soft power*, the power of a State to attract foreign nations and publics through co-option, rather than coercion (in contrast with hard power), mainly through economic and cultural influence, and *public diplomacy*, which are the various forms of government-sponsored actions taken in order to communicate more directly with foreign audiences.

In other words, since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia has used football as a tool of public diplomacy, in order to advance its soft power, with the aim of not simply relying on hard

⁷Jack de Menezes, “World Cup 2018: Vladimir Putin welcomes fans to ‘open, hospitable and friendly’ Russia at opening ceremony”, *The Independent* - June 14, 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/world-cup/world-cup-2018-live-opening-ceremony-vladimir-putin-speech-latest-news-a8399261.html>

⁸Ibid.

power (coercion) when dealing with other nations in the international arena; and has done so by creating economic links to world football, that would in turn facilitate the political usage of the sport, in a strategy not completely dissimilar to that deployed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War (1947-1991).

The objective of this thesis, then, is to analyze why and how Russia became intertwined with world football, from a financial and political point of view, and explain in what ways those ties were part of a broader foreign affairs strategy of soft power and public diplomacy. At last, this thesis will relay an assessment of the impact that the war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine had on the Russian economic and political ties to world football, and consequently on its foreign policy-making strategies.

1.1 Research Question:

“To what extent did Russia's economic and political ties to world football help in propelling its foreign policy strategies, namely public diplomacy and soft power, and how were those strategies affected by the war in Ukraine?”

1.2 Aims:

The main aim of this thesis is to explore the connections between foreign policy strategies adopted by the Russian State since the dissolution of the Soviet Union – namely public diplomacy and soft power – and world football, and to assess to what extent the war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine, started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and which has escalated into a full-scale war of aggression since February 2022, has caused a significant impact on those strategies.

1.3 Reasons for Choosing this Topic:

Sports have become one of the pillars of social life since the Industrial Revolution, and while its impact on politics is known, it has only begun to be thoroughly studied and documented in the last sixty years. Moreover, the connection between sports, diplomacy, international relations, and political science has mostly been reduced to the positive impacts it has on diplomatic relations, the promotion of positive values (such as the Olympic pillars of excellence, friendship, and respect)⁹, and the revenue it provides.

This paper, however, has the objective of critically evaluating the real impact that sports can have on the drafting and implementation of a strategy of public diplomacy, by enhancing a country's soft power, but also increasing its gains (both political and economic) through that sport, – in this case football. Furthermore, this paper will also evaluate how ineffective this strategy becomes once the State, or political group employing it, engages in aggressive behavior, which contradicts the structure of soft power and public diplomacy, more broadly, and sports, more specifically.

1.4 Theoretical Framework:

The hypothesis that will be explored in this thesis is that Russia's foreign strategy of soft power and public diplomacy has relied heavily on football, both politically and economically, and that this strategy has mostly fallen apart since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

This paper will be built upon the basis of Joseph Nye's 1990 definition of *soft power*, and the concept of *public diplomacy*, as coined by Edmund Gullion in the 1960s. Nye defines soft power as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or

⁹*Olympic Values* (International Olympic Committee), <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-values>

payment”¹⁰, while public diplomacy is defined as “the process by which international actors advance their ends abroad through engagement of publics”.¹¹

Looking through those lenses, it can, and has been argued, that during a period, especially between the hosting of the Sochi 2014 Olympics, and the 2018 World Cup, Russia was one of the major wielders of soft power strategies globally, in fact, until 2022, with data that preceded the war in Ukraine, Russia occupied the 9th position of the Global Soft Power Index.¹² Moreover, the *Gallup International’s 41st Annual Global End of Year Survey*, conducted in 2017, showed that, globally, Putin (29%), was preferred by respondents to be their own country leader, rather than then President of the United States Donald Trump (17%); and a majority of countries, preferred a world in which both the USA and Russia shared the role of ‘most powerful State in the world’, rather than the maintenance of American hegemony.¹³

Yet, soft power is not a strategy that simply is born out of the desire to ‘win hearts and minds’, it is a complex set of policies, aiming at more long-term objectives, rather than immediate results. Furthermore, as explained by Nancy Snow in the *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, to get a soft power advantage, a country mostly relies on three main factors: “1. when a nation has greater access to multiple communication channels that can influence how issues are framed in global news media; 2. when culture and ideas match prevailing global norms; 3. when a country’s credibility is enhanced by domestic and international behavior”.¹⁴

While Russia has improved its communication reach since the end of the Cold War, and especially now in the *cyber age*; and that point two especially resonates with Russia’s

¹⁰Joseph Nye, “Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept”. *Palgrave Commun* issue no. 3, (2017). <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms20178>

¹¹Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull, *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (England: Routledge, 2020), 4.

¹²“Global Soft Power Index 2023”, *Brand Finance - Brandirectory*, 2023, <https://brandirectory.com/softpower/2022/nation?country=149>

¹³“Gallup International’s 41st Annual Global End of Year Survey”, *Gallup International Association* - 2017, <https://orb-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Putin-Vs-Trump-Global-Leaders-Jan-2018.pdf>

¹⁴Snow, *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, 5

closest allies, particularly within the *BRICS*; point three, which relates to credibility, has been not only a struggle for the Russian government, but in fact, a threat to the entirety of Russia's soft power strategy.

When Russia deploys a 'military operation', or invasion, of one of its neighbors, being Chechnya (1999), Georgia (2008) or Ukraine (since 2014), they are utilizing what Nye calls "hard military power"¹⁵, that strategy, he explains, creates more immediate effects for Russia, and is also seen as more visibly efficacious, and in the short run, might create the idea that "hard power trumps soft power".

Yet, it also brings forward counter-hard power actions from those interested in deterring Russia, such as the economic sanctions imposed by the European Union; or the United States supplying Ukraine with arms and ammunition. The more the war advances, then, the more difficult it becomes to go back to the initial state where all parties were deploying soft power in order to co-opt allies, and hard power strategies become the norm. Moreover, in the case of an end to the conflict, those sanctions and sales of weapons might be discontinued, but it will be more difficult to rebuild the ties created by soft power, given how heavily they rely on credibility, trust, and cooperation.

Looking at the specific case of football, a return to the status that Russia enjoyed before the war started in February 2022, seems even more difficult, as most Russian football-club owners around Europe had to sell their teams, and almost all contracts were ended unilaterally by clubs and competitions that were sponsored by Russian companies. Besides that, the situation of the Russian national team, in special, which has been suspended indefinitely by UEFA, seem to draw back to what happened to Israel in the 1970s, when several members of the AFC refused to play against them, based on their aggressive behavior towards other

¹⁵Joseph Nye, "Soft Power After Ukraine", *Project Syndicate*, May 3, 2022. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/soft-power-after-russia-war-in-ukraine-by-joseph-s-nye-2022-05?barrier=accesspaylog>

members of the confederation, until they too were suspended 1974. Their situation was only resolved once they were admitted to UEFA, where they are affiliated to this day, but not before Israeli football remained in a limbo for several years, which sent back their sporting growth greatly.

While it is impossible to truly predict what impact the war will have on Russia's policy-making strategies, the objective of this work is to analyze what has already happened since the beginning of the war, and what has been described in the literature related to this topic, in order to steer away from speculation.

These concepts of soft and hard power, as well as public diplomacy, are closely linked with the *neoliberal* school of thought, as is most of the academic work related to sports studies in the humanities area, and for that reason, this school will provide most of the basis for this work. For this reason, the constructivist and realist approaches will be less explored, or not considered at all.

This paper will also be looking closely at many of James Riordan's works devoted to Soviet and Post-Soviet sports and politics, as he is one of the leading sports historians of the 20th Century, and the first Western academic to devote most of his work to the study of Eastern European sports.

1.5 Limitations:

At the time of the conclusion of this paper, the issue of the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, and for that reason, there is a challenge in assessing and evaluating the quality of the sources related to the conflict, especially those put forward by media outlets which are not in direct contact with the belligerent or resisting parties.

To be able to address this problem, I will be considering articles from both Ukraine and Russia, as well as other certified credible third-party sources. Articles hailing from Russia,

however, have proven to be another limitation, as many of them provide one-sided approaches to the problems they are describing.

Moreover, in the attempt to achieve a concise and coherent argument, football was selected as the focus of this study, from an array of options of other relevant sports.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis:

This thesis is divided into two main sections following the introduction (Chapter 1). The first part is composed of chapters 2 and 3 refer to the literature review (Chapter 2) which reviews and critically analyzes the relevant literature related to the topic of soft power, public diplomacy, football and Russia-Ukraine relations. The literature review is followed by a historical overview (Chapter 3), which aims at giving context and background on the development of sports in Russian (and Soviet) society in the backdrop of public diplomacy.

The second part of this work is further divided into two chapters, which have the objective of critically analyzing the chosen case study: Russian soft power and public diplomacy in the context of world football, and the effects brought forward by the war in Ukraine. Chapter 4 is an analysis of the economic landscape of football in Russia, explaining the origins of the oligarchy, their impact on world football, and the ownership and sponsorship economic deals made by Russian companies, such as Gazprom.

Chapter 5 lays down the characteristics of football's impact on Russia's political landscape, and how it has been used by Vladimir Putin and close allies to promote their own political agenda and values through public diplomacy. This chapter gives an assessment of the 2018 World Cup, the bidding and organization processes and the effect of the tournament on Russia's political landscape.

Finally, chapter 6 brings together the key conclusions of the study.

1.7 Methodology:

1.7.1 Case Study and Reasoning:

This thesis will be built on a case study: Russia's foreign policy strategies since the end of the Soviet Union, and its connections to world football. To then analyze what were the effects of the war of aggression against Ukraine inside this context.

The reason why this case study was chosen lies in the fact that Russia was a major participant in world football, having hosted the 2018 World Cup, for example. More specifically, it was also influential inside the context of European football, with representatives on the boards of UEFA, being the second country with the most appearances in the UEFA European Championship (EURO) and two of its best-qualified national teams qualified directly to the UEFA Champions League.

Most important, however, was how connected football, in all its ramifications, was to the Russian foreign policy strategy. Football acted as a medium where the Russian government, characterized in its highest form by the figure of Vladimir Putin, was able to promote Russian values, engage in business operations, and facilitate diplomatic relations, mostly in Europe, but also globally. Moreover, this model proved to be remarkably effective, being championed nowadays by the Gulf States (such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia), as well as China, and the United States. Adding to that, the war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine, which started in February 2022, paved the way for a new level of analysis, one which takes into consideration, how, if at all, this system of governmental attachment to a specific sport can survive the sanctions and global scrutiny, such as those imposed on Russia as a result of the war.

1.7.2 Data and Sources:

This research will be conducted based on qualitative analysis. I will analyze texts, speeches, audio, and videos in order to better understand the subject, and answer my research question.

My main sources are scholarly research and books that were written on the field of sports studies, official documents from football organizations such as FIFA and UEFA (i.e., statutes), press releases, video and audio from official speeches, and newspaper articles that contain relevant information.

The objective of using such data is to better understand what has been done in the field of sports studies regarding the evolution of football in Russia, as well as on Russian foreign political strategy, and public diplomacy, and where will my own research and possible conclusions fit inside this overall analysis.

2. Literature Review

In order to better understand the analysis that will be conducted in this research thesis, this chapter will be devoted to contextualizing the main subjects, concepts, and developments that form the broader picture of this study.

2.1 The Concepts of Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

Defined first by American political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. in 1985, *soft power* was described as a counterpoint to *hard power* in foreign policy making. According to Nye, hard power is “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will.”¹⁶ ‘Carrots’ in this metaphor stand for rewards, such as the reduction of trade barriers, or a military alliance, for those willing to cooperate, while the ‘sticks’ are political, economic, or military threats, such as sanctions, military intervention, cut of diplomatic ties, among others. This tool of foreign policy is widely used, especially between nations that had a clear imbalance in their political capabilities, where the stronger State used hard power tactics to coerce weaker nations.

One historical example of the use of hard power strategies happened during the period known as the Cold War (1947-1991), where both the United States of America and the Soviet Union used hard power in order both to create alliances and to contain the other’s political powers.

During this period of the Cold War, specifically in the late 1980s, Joseph Nye started to craft and promote an alternative to hard power. In Nye’s view, as the Soviet Union shrunk, it would be wise for the United States to use a less abrasive approach, which did not risk alienating possible allies based on fear of reprisals. He called this strategy of co-optation, rather

¹⁶Joseph Nye, *Propaganda Isn't the Way: Soft Power*. (Paris: International Herald Tribune, 2003), 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/10/opinion/IHT-soft-power-propaganda-isnt-the-way.html>

than coercion, *soft power*. Soft power was to be a foreign policy strategy that prioritized values, culture, and policies above economic military and economic power. According to Nye:

"A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them."¹⁷

Thus, soft power is a political strategy intended at improving a country's reputation and creating cooperation, but the way to promote this strategy abroad is through *public diplomacy*. As a term 'public diplomacy' was coined in 1965 by former US diplomat Edmund Gullion, in an attempt to distance American overseas intelligence activities from the term *propaganda* which had begun to be seen as pejorative during the Cold War.¹⁸ For that reason "*public diplomacy* has been widely seen as the transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals."¹⁹ Historian Nicholas J. Cull defined five main elements which compose public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, exchange diplomacy, international news and broadcasting, and cultural diplomacy.²⁰ A country is successful in their public diplomacy policy the more it engages with each of those categories.

¹⁷Joseph Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 616 (2008): 94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.

¹⁸"Defining Public Diplomacy" *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/page/what-is-pd>

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 616 (2008): 32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097993?seq=4>

According to Nye, public diplomacy is “a means of promoting a country’s soft power.”²¹ Meaning, the strategies adopted to advance soft power. In this context, areas such as economic trade, international networking, diplomacy, education, governance, and culture are all used as sources of political power. Some examples of public diplomacy are Hollywood productions being used for the promotion of American values; the Pope’s influence over more than a billion Catholics; Cuba’s medical internationalism policy; or the *Erasmus* program which attracts thousands of students to Europe every year. For this reason, this paper will use Nye’s definition of public diplomacy as part of the larger context of soft power.

Sports are another source of public diplomacy, as it helps to create networks of athletes, accelerates the movement of peoples across countries, builds national prestige, brings exposure to a country, enhances trust-building, and helps in State-building. As Derek Shearer explains, “sports are a commonality worldwide, uniting people regardless of race, gender, age, and class.”²² In the article “*Sport and Society*”, authors Frey and Eitzen built upon that concept and say that as a social institution, the impact of sports is only rivaled by, perhaps, religion. Moreover, they argue that this idea of sports as an institution is made even more obvious once one considers its commercial and entertainment roles.²³ As explained before, however, the main objective of public diplomacy tools is to empower a country politically, and recently, more and more authors have delved into this phenomenon, which François Carrard described rather objectively as “sports need governments which in turn need sports.”²⁴

²¹Joseph Nye, “Soft Power and the Public Diplomacy Revisited”, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, no. 14 (2019), 1. <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/soft-power-and-public-diplomacy-revisited>

²²Derek Shearer, “To Play Ball, Not Make War: Sports, Diplomacy and Soft Power”. *Harvard International Review* vol. 36, no. 1,(2014): 53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43649250>

²³James H. Frey, and D. Stanley Eitzen, “Sport and Society”. *Annual Review of Sociology*, no. 17, (1991): 503. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083352>

²⁴François Carrard, “Sports and Politics on the International Scene”. *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* vol. 78, no. 1, (2011): 25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42740993>

Examples of sports diplomacy, or the use of sports for the promotion of soft power, are endless, but some well-documented ones are the 1970s *Ping-Pong Diplomacy*, between the People's Republic of China and the United States²⁵; the dominance of Olympic sports, especially gymnastics, by the communist countries during the Cold War²⁶; the US policy of promoting baseball "wherever the U.S. Marines have landed²⁷"; the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics which helped Japan's return to the political arena after World War II; and the South Africa 1995 Rugby World Cup, which was the first international sports event after the end of Apartheid, and which was won by the 'underdog' hosts²⁸.

This thesis, however, will focus on one specific sport, which has taken center stage since the mid-20th century not only as the most watched and practiced sport in the world but also as the one most frequently used for soft power purposes: Association Football.

Much of the research in the field of sports studies during the Cold War concerned Olympic sports (and it can be argued that this is because football, or soccer as it is known in America, is simply not as popular in the US as it is in the rest of the world). Nonetheless, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, sports researchers moved their focus to football. Being because its main representative body, FIFA, has an institution with representation in all continents and more nations represented than the United Nations (211, versus the UNs 193), or because football started to be used as a tool to promote world views from across the political

²⁵More about Ping-Pong Diplomacy in: Wang Guanhua, "‘Friendship First’: China’s Sports Diplomacy during the Cold War". *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* vol. 12, no. 3/4 , (2003), 133–53.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23613227>.

²⁶Timur Mukhamatulin, "Women’s Gymnastics and the Cold War: How Soviet Smiles Won Over the West" *NYU Jordan Center* - February 16, 2023. https://jordanrussiacycenter.org/news/womens-gymnastics-and-the-cold-war-how-a-soviet-smiles-won-over-the-west/#.ZBX6-R_MK3B

²⁷Robert Elias "The Foreign Policy of Baseball" *Foreign Policy in Focus* - April 2, 2010, https://fpif.org/the_foreign_policy_of_baseball/

²⁸Holly Yan, "How rugby, ping-pong and other sports have mended political rifts" *CNN* - January 9, 2018 <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/09/world/sports-diplomacy-history/index.html>

spectrum, from the liberal democracy of the European Union, Latin America's 'pink tide', to the autocratic regimes of the Gulf States.

2.1.1 Sharp Power

Popularized in a Foreign Affairs Magazine article from November 2017,²⁹ the term "*Sharp Power*" has been increasingly used to describe the influence exerted by countries such as Russia and China, which, according to the authors, are not trying to "win the hearts and minds" of the foreign public, but rather "attempt to make democracy look relatively less attractive, through an attack on the integrity of democracies and on the ideas underlying democratic systems."³⁰ To them, this type of foreign strategy cannot not be characterized as soft power because it "involves censorship and manipulation designed not to win over publics but to degrade the integrity of independent institutions."³¹

After this article, academic work, and political discussions, especially in the US., has tended to frame Russian foreign policy efforts as sharp power. With Joseph Nye adding that he believes that China and Russia's leadership still have not fully understood the full grasp of soft power tools.³² The author of this dissertation, however, believes that, while this is a debate that will still permeate academia in the foreseeable future, it is counterproductive, to the objective of this work, to try to rigorously separate hard, soft, sharp and *smart*³³ power, as every country is continuously deploying all those strategies in different combinations, depending on context, and how those strategies are perceived by the foreign public is also dependent on context, such as geographic proximity, cultural affinity, political alliances, and economic dependence. For

²⁹Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power" *Foreign Affairs* - November 16, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

³⁰Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil and Jessica Ludwig, "Forget Hearts and Minds" *Foreign Policy* - September 14, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/forget-hearts-and-minds-sharp-power/>

³¹ Ibid.

³²Joseph Nye, "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*. April 29, 2013, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power>

³³ Defined in 2008, smart power is a combination of hard and soft power strategies, more in: Diane Coudu, "Smart Power", *Harvard Business Review*, November, 2008, <https://hbr.org/2008/11/smart-power>

that reason, henceforth, this work will only refer to Russia's public diplomacy efforts as *soft power strategies*, and from that premise, analyze if they were successful, or not, in 'winning the hearts and minds' of others.

2.1.2 Sportswashing

More recently, the term *Sportswashing* began to be increasingly used to describe “a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front. Sportswashers use mega-events to try to foment national prestige and to convey economic or political advancement.”³⁴ In other words Sportswashing describes a strategy, used by States, political leaders, or organizations, in order to enhance their reputation, nationally and/or internationally, and attempt to divert attention from controversial actions or human rights abuses through involvement in sports. The reasoning behind it comes from the historical association between sports and valor, and the overall popularity that sports have in modern societies.

Sportswashing often translates into the investment of significant resources in sports sponsorship, hosting major sporting events, or purchasing sports clubs. One example of a country which has, in the last 10 years, invested in all of the economic endeavors cited above, is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and as Michael Skey explains, the reason for engagement in Sportswashing is “if Saudi Arabia is being discussed in relation to a well-run, high-profile golf or tennis tournament, then it isn't *only* being associated with an appalling human rights record, an inequitable political system or resource exploitation.”³⁵

³⁴Jules Boykoff, “Toward a Theory of Sportswashing: Mega-Events, Soft Power, and Political Conflict”, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 39, issue 4 (2022): 342-351, <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0095>

³⁵Michael Skey, “Sportswashing: Media headline or analytic concept?”, *The International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 58, issue 5 (2022), 749-764
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10126902221136086>

According to some authors, the world of football is not immune to sportswashing either, and examples of that can be seen in the hosting of the 2018 and 2022 World Cup s by Russia and Qatar, respectively,³⁶ and the acquisition of teams such as PSG, Manchester City, and Newcastle United by Gulf-State based consortiums.³⁷

While it is important to understand what Sportswashing is, and why some authors believe it will only increase worldwide,³⁸ the term, which was only coined in 2015,³⁹ has been accused of perpetuating Western-bias, as it is mostly applied to non-Western Countries (such as Russia, China, the Gulf-States, and Brazil),⁴⁰ while also understating the power of perception of the ordinary citizen or, as Simon Chadwick put it in 2018 “Despite the power of sport, which is in fact often overstated, it is insufficient to induce amnesia in the collective memory. Indeed, despite an enthralling World Cup, many of us remain in no doubt about Vladimir Putin’s ambitions and intentions.”⁴¹

Furthermore, there is not enough analysis done in order to differentiate Sportswashing from soft power or public diplomacy, and the work that has been done in this area is conflicting. For example, some believe sportswashing is in its very nature conflicting with soft power, claiming that sportswashing exists to omit a “specific moral problem that is causing reputational damage”,⁴² and a handful of authors go as far as stating that sportswashing is a

³⁶César Jiménez-Martínez and Michael Skey, “How repressive states and governments use ‘sportswashing’ to remove stains on their reputation”, *The Conversation* - July 25, 2018 <https://theconversation.com/how-repressive-states-and-governments-use-sportswashing-to-remove-stains-on-their-reputation-100395>

³⁷Skey, “Sportswashing: Media headline”, 749-764

³⁸Robin Roslender, “The spread of sportswashing within top-flight football: a discussion of its underpinnings, mechanisms and probable consequences”, *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, vol. ahead-of-print (2023) <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/AAAJ-06-2022-5849/full/html>

³⁹Gulnara Akhundova, “Baku European Games 2015: A fearsome PR machine is using sport to sweep human rights under the carpet”, *The Independent* - 12 June, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/baku-european-games-2015-a-fearsome-pr-machine-is-using-sport-to-sweep-human-rights-under-the-carpet-10314316.html>

⁴⁰Skey, “Sportswashing: Media headline”, 749-764

⁴¹Simon Chadwick, “Sport-washing, soft power and scrubbing the stains”, *The Asia & Pacific Policy Society* – 24 August, 2018, <https://www.policyforum.net/sport-washing-soft-power-and-scrubbing-the-stains/>

⁴²Kyle Fruh, Alfred Archer & Jake Wojtowicz, “Sportswashing: Complicity and Corruption”, *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, vol. 17 (2023): 101-118 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17511321.2022.2107697>

strategy deployed almost exclusively by autocracies.⁴³ On the other hand, however, there are authors which describe sportswashing as a strategy of “consociation rather than deception”,⁴⁴ meant to create positive associations to a country, and believe that “the concept of soft power overlaps with sportswashing.”⁴⁵

For that reason, to portray soft power and public diplomacy as “legitimate”, and giving sportswashing pejorative undertones, while, as explained before, associating sportswashing with mostly non-Western States, may create an unnecessary semantic trap, where “Sportswashing is in the eye of the beholder.”⁴⁶ Hence, for the goal of clarity, conciseness, and objectivity, this thesis will consider sportswashing as one of the components of soft power, without bringing forward a judgment of value of such strategies, as many authors attempted at doing before. There will be, however, an explanation on why and how sports are used by authoritarian States, which shows that this connection can be more complex than simply sportswashing.

2.2 Why Football?

As was explained previously, football plays a central role in sports studies. Many might argue that this is due merely because of the popularity of the sport, but some authors have devoted their time to conducting in-depth analyses regarding football’s most unique characteristics, which create a multifaceted phenomenon that has long left behind its status as an amateur pastime to become the most practiced, and the most lucrative, sport in the world.

⁴³Sarath K. Ganji “The Rise of Sportswashing”, *Journal of Democracy* - vol. 34 (2023): 63
<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/886933/summary>

⁴⁴Skey, “Sportswashing: Media headline”, 749-764

⁴⁵Boykoff, “Toward a Theory”, 342-351

⁴⁶Vivienne Walt, “Saudi Arabia Faces Accusations of ‘Sportswashing.’ For Young Saudis, It’s a Chance to Enjoy New Freedoms” *Time* - December 10, 2021 <https://time.com/6127539/saudi-arabia-jeddah-f1-sportswashing/>

According to Andrei Markovits and Lars Rensmann, the ‘secret’ to football’s success lies in simplicity. The game can be played almost anywhere, under any weather conditions, and by anyone. Not even physical assets, which are so important in other games, are strictly fundamental to football. Even the ball itself is not necessary, as one is perfectly capable of playing football with any object that even slightly resembles the shape and weight of a football.⁴⁷ Additionally, the sets of rules and institutions that regulate football are clear and straightforward, which facilitates the connection between players and fans around the world, independent of their social background, class, or race. Those aspects create what they define as a “universal language,” in which, wherever one is, football will be played and understood in the same manner.

The authors keep explaining that “There are certainly other globally understood and agreed-upon universal languages, such as the laws of the natural sciences. As Lawrence Kitchin put it as early as 1966, soccer may be the only genuinely accepted and widely legitimate ‘global idiom’ apart from such sciences.”⁴⁸ And, unlike these sciences, football is comprehended by elites and masses alike. Moreover, the football phenomenon does not only rely upon the simplicity and the natural excitement brought by the game, since “Civic pride and local identity [also] constituted key factors in the game’s very success. Indeed, the identity-generating, class-affirming localism remained ingrained in soccer’s universal, standardized, and class-transcending language from its early cultural rise in the late nineteenth century to the present.”⁴⁹

Football, then, by its very nature and organization, transcends the realm of sports and presents itself to the world as a source of self-determination of peoples and cultures in which clubs are set to represent certain groups and values while stadiums become a meeting ground

⁴⁷ Andrei S. Markovits, and Lars Rensmann. *Gaming the World: How Sports Are Reshaping Global Politics and Culture*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 56.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 44

⁴⁹ Ibid. 49

for people who share similar worldviews. This idea becomes even more evident when taking into consideration the most fanatic supporters of a club, known as *Ultras*⁵⁰ who consider themselves the mouthpiece of certain ideologies or political views. Some examples are the openly right-wing Ultras of FC Zenit Saint Petersburg⁵¹ and SS Lazio⁵², or their left-wing counterparts, namely AS Livorno Calcio⁵³ and Fußball-Club Sankt Pauli von 1910.⁵⁴ It is not only political groups that take over football fanbases either, some groups of Ultras also represent other tenets, such as religion and regionalism. Scotland's main teams' Celtic FC and Rangers FC are known for representing, respectively, the catholic minority and the protestant majority within the country,⁵⁵ and FC Barcelona, a football team based in Catalonia, openly advocates for the region's independence.⁵⁶

⁵⁰An *Ultra* is a term that originated in Italy but is widely used all around the world, which defines the most fanatical supporters of a football team. They are known for their "*tifo*" (banners) and chants. Some ultras are also infamous, however, for their violent behavior; more about that in: Tobias Jones "Beyond the violence, the shocking power the ultras wield over Italian football" *The Guardian* - April 29, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/29/beyond-the-violence-shocking-power-ultras-wield-over-italian-football>

⁵¹Zenit's ultras are known worldwide for their racist and right-wing political views, more in: Gennady Fyodorov, "We're not racists!: Zenit St Petersburg fan group against black and gay players joining Russian champions" *The Independent* - December 17, 2012, <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/european/were-not-racists-zenit-st-petersburg-fan-group-against-black-and-gay-players-joining-russian-8422571.html>

⁵²More about Lazio's Ultras pro-fascist views in: Gianluca Mezzofiore, "Lazio fans hang pro-Mussolini banner, make fascist salutes ahead of Liberation day" *CNN* - April 24, 2019 <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/24/football/lazio-fans-mussolini-banner/index.html>

⁵³Livorno's history is deeply intertwined with the socialist struggle in Italy, more about the team at: Richard Hall and Luca Hodges-Ramon, "Livorno: Serie A alternative club guide" *The Guardian* - September 23, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/the-gentleman-ultra/2015/sep/23/livorno-serie-a-alternative-club-guide>

⁵⁴St. Pauli's are not only known for their left-wing activism but also for their support for the *punk* and *ANTIFA* movements, more in: Luke Cartledge, "FC St Pauli: how it became the football team of punk and techno" *The Guardian*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jun/20/fc-st-pauli-how-it-became-the-football-team-of-punk-and-techno>

⁵⁵More about the *Old Firm Derby* (Scotland's main football rivalry) in: Warren Haughton, "Old firm derby' Why is Celtic vs Rangers called the Old Firm and which team has won the most Glasgow derbies?" *The Sun* - May 12, 2019, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/football/3363047/celtic-vs-rangers-old-firm-derby-scottish-premiership/>

⁵⁶Barcelona's motto "*more than a club*" reflects its political stance since its foundation, more information in: Andy West, "Catalan referendum: How FC Barcelona found themselves at centre of issue" *BBC* - October 1, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/41461197>

2.2.1 Football Diplomacy

Since the foundation of Notts County in 1862, making it the oldest professional football club in the world,⁵⁷ football has been used as a tool for politics. Furthermore, many political scientists understand that football is not only a tool but an actual institution that imposes itself as a player in the political arena. Fritz Stemme wrote in his essay *The Social Psychology of Football* that “[Football] is a universal institution to which social and political barriers are unbeknownst...No other institution was quicker than football in breaking barriers between classes, nations, and social systems.”⁵⁸ Stemme then explains that for this reason, he understands the comparison made between the role of the highest governing body of football, FIFA, and that of the United Nations, given that both have as a final goal the promotion of peace through state cooperation.⁵⁹ Political scientist Pascal Boniface, goes as far as using football as a source of State determination, taking into consideration the newly independent ex-Yugoslav states in the 1990s, such as Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later with non-internationally recognized states such as Palestine and Kosovo. Boniface says, “[it is] as if a state were no longer defined by the three conventional elements alone (territory, population, and government) but also by a fourth element: its national football team.”⁶⁰

To exemplify how much of a social impact FIFA has on states, one can look at representation. FIFA counts 211 recognized national associations, 18 more than the United Nations, some of those being: Palestine, Kosovo, Hong Kong, and Puerto Rico. Nations recognized by FIFA are also obligated to play against whomever they draw in official matches,

⁵⁷“Club History” *Notts Country Football Club* <https://www.nottscountyfc.co.uk/club/history/club-history/>

⁵⁸Fritz Stemme, *The Social Psychology of Football* (Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca Digital da Faculdade Getúlio Vargas, 1981) 115. <http://bibliotecadigital.fgv.br/ojs/index.php/abp/article/viewFile/18449/17197>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 115

⁶⁰Pascal Boniface. “Football As A Factor (And A Reflection) Of International Politics” *The International Spectator* Vol. 33. No. 4, (1998), 5. www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/artpb.pdf.

making it, in theory, necessary for countries to suspend their political quarrels momentarily in order to play such matches, in a spirit not dissimilar to that of the Olympic Truce.⁶¹

This peaceful face-off between rival nations was never more apparent than in 1998, during the 16th World Cup played in France, in which Iran and the United States of America faced each other in what was called “The Mother of all Games”⁶². It was the first time such nations would go against each other in any field other than the military since the ousting of the pro-Western *Shah* Reza Pahlavi. After much preparation by both federations and FIFA to avoid any problems during the match, Iran won the game 2-1.⁶³ The match was so successful that both teams played a friendly game in Pasadena, California, a little more than a year, drawing on a score of 1-1.⁶⁴

Similarly, in 2008, Armenia and Turkey, two nations with long-standing historical disputes, played a World Cup qualifying game amidst conflicts between the two nations on a deadlock in Georgia. The match was attended by both presidents at the time, Turkey’s Abdullah Gul and his Armenian counterpart Serge Sarkisian. Even though the match had more symbolic than practical results, political thinkers saw it as a positive attempt at *football diplomacy*.

Another example of this ‘football diplomacy’, i.e., the diplomatic relations that happen because of or during football events, happened when Didier Drogba, then a player for Chelsea Football Club, became a symbol of peace in his home country of Ivory Coast, when he publicly pleaded for, and succeeded at guaranteeing, a ceasefire between rival factions engaging in a civil war in the country.⁶⁵

⁶¹For more information on the tradition of the Olympic Truce: <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-truce>

⁶²Jere Longman. “Iran vs. America: Political Football.” *The New York Times*, June 18, 1998, www.nytimes.com/1998/06/18/sports/world-cup-98-iran-vs-america-political-football.html.

⁶³Eoin O’Callaghan, “Great Satan 1-2 Iran: the most politically charged match in World Cup history” *The Guardian* - June 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/jun/20/great-satan-1-2-iran-the-most-politically-charged-match-in-world-cup-history>

⁶⁴Mani Djazmi, “USA v Iran: The historic 2000 friendly match planned to bring countries together” *BBC* - December 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/55216193>

⁶⁵Olivier Guiberteau, “Didier Drogba: How Ivory Coast striker helped to halt civil war in his home nation” *BBC* - March 31, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/52072592>

2.2.2 Football and Nationalism

Cases like those of Iran and the United States, and Armenia and Turkey, cited earlier, created an optimistic view of the game's impact on mediation and diplomacy. But as explained before, football's capacity of becoming a heavily politicized arena, associated with the national pride infused in World Cup games—in which players from all over the country are chosen to represent their teams in a tournament in which the ultimate prize is international recognition—can foment an environment of increasing animosities. Author Roger Levermore in his book *'Sport and International Relations'* explains that “Sometimes, simply taking part in FIFA competitions can create the conditions for exaggerated displays of nationalism which have a meaning beyond the games themselves.”⁶⁶ That is due to the fact that “International football (...) can act as a surrogate theater for the working-up of ‘passionate nationalism’.”⁶⁷

This was never as clear as in the 1969 incident known as the “Football War”. Previously existing political tensions between El Salvador and Honduras concerning migration, contested borders, and differences in living standards culminated in war after the defeat of Honduras during a qualifying match between both nations for the 1970 World Cup. The event led to a four-day armed conflict that claimed approximately 3000 lives, including those of civilians. The match, more specifically, and the World Cup, in general, were extensively used by both countries in propaganda campaigns to not only justify the war but to keep it in motion. Authors Yuriy Veytskin, Claire Lockerby, and Steven McMullen explain that:

The newspapers and government understood that being a supporter of football is intrinsically an act of micro-nationalism. International football then magnifies this micro-nationalism on the grand stage of the World Cup qualifying matches. Finally, football is centered on the ideas of deprivation and frustration, which propaganda

⁶⁶Roger Levermore and Adrian Budd, *Sport and International Relations: An Emerging Relationship* (London: Routledge, 2004), 20

⁶⁷Ibid.

can easily fuel for a national cause. Unlike in American sports, where points are generally scored at a frenetic pace, football is based on denial and thus acts as a microcosm of dispossession and denial.⁶⁸

Pascal Boniface will later add that to believe that the match was “responsible for the war is as accurate as saying that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 was the cause of the First World War.”⁶⁹ As shown before, a mixture of political animosities and propaganda played a significant role in the war, but it is clear that the profoundly nationalistic and identity-driven environment of football stadiums was able to set the war in motion and attract civilians from both sides to it.

More recently, in October 2019, at the height of what came to be known as the *Moon-Kim Diplomacy* (2019-2022),⁷⁰ the South Korean national team traveled to Pyongyang for the first time since the Korean War (1950-1953), as all other matches between North and South Korea had either been played in Seoul or Shanghai. The match was much anticipated by FIFA officials, who had voiced their support in March of that year for the creation of a championship between both nations to happen every four years.⁷¹ The game, however, was a disaster and a huge setback for football diplomacy in the region. According to the Korea Football Association’s (representative of the South) vice president, Choi Young-i, “It [the match] was like war.” Many South-Korean athletes, including the team’s captain Son Heung-min, complained about how violent the game was and how scared the North Korean players appeared to be. In the end, the game, which was played behind “closed doors”, meaning no

⁶⁸Veytskin, Yuriy, et al. “The Soccer War.” *Soccer Politics / The Politics of Football*, October 24, 2013, sites.duke.edu/wcwp/research-projects/the-soccer-war/.

⁶⁹Boniface. “Football As a Factor”, 7

⁷⁰“Moon-Kim diplomacy has failed” *The Asean Post* - April 28, 2019. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/moon-kim-diplomacy-has-failed>

⁷¹“Waging a War’: South Korea’s Football Qualifier in Pyongyang.” *Al Jazeera* - October 17, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2019/10/17/waging-a-war-south-koreas-football-qualifier-in-pyongyang>

fans or media from the South were allowed to attend it, remained at a 0-0 draw.⁷² Similarly to the Kim-Moon diplomatic effort at the time, which has since then been considered a failure, so has the game between the two Koreas in Pyongyang.

Such examples are just some, amongst many others, that show that the political aspect of football is a complex issue, not merely a tool for facilitating diplomacy, as was mentioned by some authors before. The very existence of the game relies on the fact that it is equally important to score a goal as it is to deny the adversary any goals. In a volleyball, American football, or basketball game, it is virtually impossible to stop the adversary from scoring points, while in football this is half of the main goal of the game. Those microaggressions, which are part of the game itself, associated with the heavily charged identity and nationalist struggles which were previously explained, have the power to transform football arenas into fighting grounds—an extension of political and military struggles. In fact, by being so politically charged, and confined to a space in which “us” versus “them” is so clearly defined, football can and will worsen previously existing conflicts if not managed by the general principles of sportsmanship.⁷³

The problem relies on how, if at all, federations such as FIFA and UEFA have the power, or the willingness to enforce such principles and inspect their application.

2.2.3 Football and Authoritarianism

As early as 1936, when Berlin hosted the XI Summer Olympics of the modern era, scholars devoted their time to researching the connection between sports and authoritarianism. American author John R. Tunis wrote in 1936 “From being a simple source of amusement and recreation, it [sports] became a means to an end, a weapon in the hands of the All-Highest. It

⁷²“North Korea v South Korea: Match Was 'like War', Says South.” *BBC News* - 17 Oct. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50078254.

⁷³The Cambridge Dictionary defines *sportsmanship* as: “behavior in sports that is fair and shows respect to the other players”.

became nationalistic." He then follows "In the nations ruled by dictators, (...) every boy and girl in the country is regimented and exploited."⁷⁴ Tunis, considered by some the "inventor of modern sports story"⁷⁵, was seemingly speaking from an American perspective, which, at the time, already understood the use of sports by dictators as a perversion of the original goal behind sports *i.e.*, entertainment.

Football, which began to gain traction in the 1930s, with the establishment of a worldwide championship separated from the Olympic Games, known as the *FIFA World Cup*, followed a similar path. While Hitler boosted national propaganda and prestige during the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the Italian national football team, known as "*Mussolini's Blackshirts*", hosted, and won, the 1934 World Cup, and followed it with another title at the 1938 World Cup, hosted by France. The team, which had a "strong sense of militarism"⁷⁶, and started and finished every game performing the fascist salute, became a dichotomy: while widely popular in places such as Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (besides post-civil war Spain), it was despised elsewhere, especially in France and England.

Nonetheless, not even Mussolini's participation, and ultimate demise, alongside Hitler, in World War II (1939-1945) was enough to discredit the political use of football by authoritarian regimes: in the years that followed, Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, continuously meddled with Spanish Football, from changing the names and colors of teams from the separatist, and anti-Franquist regions of Cataluña and the Basque country, to ordering the killing of the club presidents of both Real Madrid and Barcelona, to installing, and closely following, competitions made to honor his image, such as the *Generalísimo Cup*.⁷⁷ In the

⁷⁴John R. Tunis "The Dictators Discover Sport". *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 4, (1936): 606, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20030762>

⁷⁵Michael Cart, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*. (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2010), 31.

⁷⁶Simon Martin, "World Cup stunning moments: Mussolini's blackshirts' 1938 win" *The Guardian* April 5, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2014/apr/01/world-cup-moments-1938-italy-benito-mussolini>

⁷⁷For more information on Franco's use of football during his dictatorship: Christos Kassimeris, "Franco, the popular game and ethnocentric conduct in modern Spanish football", *Soccer & Society*, vol. 13, issue 4 (2012),

world stage, both Argentina and Chile hosted World Cup's while under violent dictatorial regimes (in 1962 and 1978, respectively), while Brazil's triumph at the 1970 Mexico World Cup was seen as "a victory for the regime"⁷⁸ of Brazil, that was, at the time, at the height of its most repressive and violent years,⁷⁹ but also engulfed in an economic crisis which up until that point, threatened the whole dictatorial system in the country.

While it is naive to understand football as a tool used exclusively by dictators and dictatorships (Brazil, for example, has won 5 World Cup s, and only one happened during the military dictatorship), it is important to understand the context of how authoritarian regimes use football teams, and championships for their own advantage. In 1970, the ruling military class was able to overthrow and fire the coach of the Brazilian team, Carlos Saldanha, considered by them to be communist leaning. Conversely, in 2002, when the democratic President Fernando Henrique Cardoso jokingly requested the then coach, Luis Felipe Scolari known as *Felipão*, to call up the charismatic player Romário, to be part of the team for the upcoming world cup, Felipão reminded the president that he was only "one amongst 170 million Brazilian fans."⁸⁰

Besides the previously debated use of sports for 'washing' away perceived ideological and political stains, football also help in creating internal hegemony, as seen with Franco, engages the youth, which in turn have less time for political dissidence, such as the spread of football in fascist Italy, helps in creating a positive association between victorious teams and authoritarian leaders, e.g. Medici and the 1970 Brazilian team, and creates a path for

555-569, DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2012.677228; and Sid Lowe, *Fear and Loathing in La Liga* (London : Yellow Jersey Press, 2014)

⁷⁸Flávio Ferrari, et al. "'Salve-nos, Seleção': a relação entre a ditadura de Médici e a Copa de 1970" *Revista Digital Laboratório da Faculdade Casper Líbero* - June 21, 2022,

<https://revistaesquinas.casperlibero.edu.br/esportes/salve-nos-selecao-a-relacao-entre-a-ditadura-de-medici-e-a-copa-de-1970/>

⁷⁹Sérgio Settani Giglio "'My Concern Was to Play Football': Relations Between Football and Dictatorship", *Football and Social Sciences in Brazil*, ed. Sérgio Settani Giglio and Marcelo Weishaupt Proni (Campinas: Editora UNICAMP, 2021), 31-47 https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-84686-2_3

⁸⁰"Felipão contraria até Fernando Henrique", *Folha de Londrina* - February 27, 2002, <https://www.folhadelondrina.com.br/esporte/felipao-contraria-ate-fernando-henrique-384441.html?d=1>

international participation and recognition, especially for countries which, for one reason or another, have their political influence diminished in the international arena, with examples ranging from East Germany, during the Cold War, to Qatar and Saudi Arabia's increased interest in the sport in the last 10 years (around the same time both countries started to put forward their national strategic blueprints: *Qatar National Vision 2030*, and *Saudi Vision 2030*, respectively).

What is more, during the organization of the 2014 World Cup, in Brazil, FIFA officials, including the FIFA secretary at the time, Jerome Valcke, voiced their discontent with the difficulty of staging a World Cup in a democracy. Valcke said: "I will say something which is crazy, but less democracy is sometimes better for organizing a World Cup," and then continued by explaining that "When you have a very strong head of state who can decide, as maybe Putin can do in 2018... that is easier for us organizers than a country such as Germany.... where you have to negotiate at different levels."⁸¹ In the same symposium, then FIFA president, Joseph 'Sepp' Blatter, expressed relief that the first World Cup he was involved in the organization of, Argentina 1978, was won by the hosts, because it represented a "kind of reconciliation of the public, of the people of Argentina, with the system, the political system, the military system at the time."⁸²

By understanding the reason why football is so influential, besides its connections to power, diplomacy, nationalism, and authoritarian nation-building and branding, one can start to envision the outline of why a country such as Russia has, historically, engaged with this sport. While some can point out that it could be, at the time, far-fetched to consider Russia an autocratic regime, that was not, as shown by the statements made by FIFA officials during the

⁸¹"Soccer: Less democracy makes for an easier World Cup - Valcke" *Reuters* - April 24, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-fifa-idUSBRE93N18F20130424>

⁸²Ibid.

organization process of the 2018 World Cup, what the institution believed, and in fact they were glad to be working with a centralized government, commanded by a single figure.

2.3 Why Russia?

Historically, Russia has used sports for an array of different reasons, some which were already discussed, such as the authoritarian use of physical education during the Soviet regime, and others which will be further discussed in more depth in ‘*Chapter 3: Brief Historical Overview of Russian Sports*’, nonetheless, it is important to highlight the impact that sports have had in Russia both internally, but also internationally when it came to their national reputation. For example, Soft Power indexes such as the ‘*Global Soft Power Index*’ (in which Russia ranked 9th in 2022, with data which preceded the invasion on Ukraine, and 13th in 2023)⁸³, takes into consideration ‘leadership in sports’ as one of the metrics used in order to rank the countries. While the ‘*Rapid-growth markets soft power index*’, explicitly acknowledges that its metric “*Olympics*”, has been chosen given the value that Olympic performance has on a country’s reputation since the beginning of the Cold War.⁸⁴

Additionally, Russia’s involvement with world football went as far to what can be considered the epitome of football engagement: hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup, making it only the fourth country, at the time, to host the competition outside the Western Europe/Americas axis (Japan/South Korea 2002, and South Africa 2010, were its predecessors, and Qatar 2022 was its successor). In what Gianni Infantino, president of FIFA since 2016, said, during a visit to the *Kremlin*, “we (Infantino and Putin) are a team. We are a team that will organise the greatest event in the history of football. The best World Cup ever, in a fantastic

⁸³“Global Soft Power Index 2023”, *Brand Finance* (see chap. 1, n. 12)

⁸⁴“Rapid Growth Markets Soft Power Index”, *Ernst & Young*, 2012, 7, https://www.skolkovo.ru/public/media/documents/research/SIEMS_Monthly_Briefing_2012-06_eng.pdf

country like Russia. The world will look at Russia, and we will spend a fantastic summer in 2018 with the World Cup, and in 2017 with the Confederations Cup.”⁸⁵

Moreover, with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the banning of Russian athletes and teams (both from FIFA and the IOC) from sports associations that followed, the case study of Russia is an unique opportunity to analyze the effects of isolation through the lens of a single microcosm, in this case sport, and understand how, if at all, the impacts suffered in this isolated field can cause repercussions in other areas, such as economic performance and political influence.

2.3.1 Russia’s Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

In the beginning of the 2000s, a general understanding that Russia, now as an independent nation, had started to deploy soft power strategies began to arise among academia. As shown before, these are used in order to increase attraction and persuade other countries (or peoples) to align with a country’s values, policies, interests, and culture.

Fiona Hill, in 2007, explained that Russia “has transformed itself from a defunct military superpower into a new energy superpower.”⁸⁶, and in turn, the revenue made from energy was used to foment its soft power.

In general, most authors agree upon which public diplomacy tools have been used the most, and more effectively, by Russia under Putin. Ariel Cohen in his essay “*Ideology And Soft Power In Contemporary Russia*” highlights the use of media and broadcasting, in the form of the news network *RT*, which include channels in Russian, English, Spanish, and Arabic; the creation of institutes, such as *Ruski Dom* (Russian House) and the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*

⁸⁵“Meeting with FIFA President Gianni Infantino”, *The Kremlin*, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51761>

⁸⁶Fiona Hill, “Moscow Discovers Soft Power”, *Current History*, vol. 105 (2006): 341, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20061001.pdf>

(Russian World), which aim at promoting Russian language, culture, and heritage to both the diaspora abroad, and foreign publics; the establishment of think-tanks such as the *Institute for Democracy and Cooperation*, in Paris; and the spread of the Russian Orthodox Church globally.⁸⁷ Hill defines that Russia became an attractive country, especially to the developing nations geographically close to it, given its “satellite television, a growing film industry, rock music, Russian popular novels, a revival of the crowning achievements of the Russian artistic tradition, and new jobs in the service and other sectors”.⁸⁸ While Stefan Meister emphasizes the relationships established between Russian organizations and political parties which, being left or right leaning, compose the opposition of established European governments, such as the *Die Linke* (left leaning) in Germany, and the *Front National* (right leaning) in France.⁸⁹

In the book “*Russia’s Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice*”, essays by different authors bring forward what they believe are the main elements of Russia’s soft power arsenal, which include strategies for increased transnational cooperation in places such as the Baltic Sea Region, the Middle East and Latin America; besides increased participation in the cyberspace, promotion of Russia as a scientific hub of higher education, and investment in business diplomacy at large.⁹⁰

Most important for this study, however, is rather the lack of literature regarding Russian cultural strategies at large, and most specifically sports diplomacy. As Olga Krasnyak put it, in her review of *Russia’s Public Diplomacy* “not all of the key elements of contemporary public diplomacy were covered. For example, the absence of sports, cultural, or city diplomacies

⁸⁷Ariel Cohen, “Ideology And Soft Power In Contemporary Russia.” Edited by Stephen J. Blank. *Perspectives On Russian Foreign Policy*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2012.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12049.6>.

⁸⁸Hill, “Moscow Discovers Soft Power”, 341.

⁸⁹Stefan Meister, “Putin’s Version of Soft Power.” *Isolation and Propaganda: The Roots and Instruments of Russia’s Disinformation Campaign*. German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2016, 7.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19011.7>.

⁹⁰Anna A. Velikaya and Greg Simons, *Russia’s Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

weakens this volume significantly and are aspects of public diplomacy that should not be overlooked.”⁹¹ In fact, this book is one of the only sources which briefly mentions sports diplomacy at all, and only in the limited context of considering it a sporadic “nation branding project”,⁹² and a result of other policies, rather than a policy in itself; and while many papers point out *Gazprom*, the biggest Russian majority state-owned multinational energy corporation, as a core element of Russian public diplomacy, being through its permeation in worldwide markets, or its association with the Russian government, most academic work fails to acknowledge Gazprom’s intricate association with football—which will be further discussed in the fourth chapter of this essay.

In general, Russian sports diplomacy, while abundant in literature on its own, lacks a connection to the wide spectrum of Russian soft power, at least in Western-based academia. Moreover, while the efforts put towards sports diplomacy in Russia, can be seen evidently in the promotion of events such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, and the 2018 Russia World Cup, besides numerous world championships of an array of sports, there has not been enough work done in order to insert this strategy in the context of Russian public diplomacy, even though Cull’s pillars of public diplomacy, which have been generally accepted as the overall definition of public diplomacy, puts heavy emphasis in cultural diplomacy.

For this reason, this essay is an attempt at beginning to close the gap that exists between Russian sports diplomacy and soft power literature, but bearing in mind that this is a continuous effort that cannot be fully achieved through a single paper, or even a limited number of academic writings.

⁹¹Olga Krasnyak, “Review – Russia’s Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice”, *E-International Relations* - October 22, 2019, <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/10/22/review-russias-public-diplomacy-evolution-and-practice/>

⁹²Velikaya, *Russia’s Public Diplomacy*, 119.

2.3.2 The ‘Berlusconization’ of football and its impacts in Russia and Ukraine:

The term “*Putinism*” and “*Putinization*” have been used recently in academia to define the social, political, and economic background of Russia under the government of Vladimir Putin. Described as early as 2008 as an “unconsolidated autocracy”⁹³ and a “new Russian authoritarianism”⁹⁴, this regime is defined by a cult of personality promoted by the government-owned media outlets, a political and economic reliance on the oligarchy (and vice versa), pan-Russian nationalism, among other aspects, including football (which will be expanded further in chapter 4 and 5 of this essay). It is important, however, to look at the phenomenon known as “*Berlusconization*”, and how it shaped media, ownership, and football in Europe in the late 1990s, to a point where many of its characteristics can be traced as to how football as an enterprise has been conducted in Russia and Ukraine since the end of the Soviet Union (1991), making it a component of *Putinism*.

Silvio Berlusconi (1936-2023) was a media tycoon, football owner, and former prime minister of Italy, serving four different mandates. He is regarded as one of the most well-known politicians of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It is his work as a media mogul, however, which propelled him to notoriety. Under Berlusconi’s *Mediaset* (the largest commercial broadcaster in Italy), the broadcasting landscape in the country changed dramatically, from breaking away from the monopoly that State-owned RAI had until that point, and establishing what came to be known as “*Entertainment TV*”, to the cult of personality that Mediaset created around Berlusconi himself.⁹⁵ Those characteristics built inside academia the concept that came

⁹³Allen C. Lynch “Russia and ‘Putinism.’” *Great Decisions*, (2008): 43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43683057>.

⁹⁴Leon Aron, “Putinism.” *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Report*, (2008): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03039>.

⁹⁵A study conducted in 2019, and published in the *American Economic Review* showed that regions that got earlier access to Mediaset were more likely to have voted for Berlusconi’s party when he first ran for office. More information in: Durante et al. “The Political Legacy of Entertainment TV”. *American Economic Review*, no. 109, (2019), <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20150958>

to be known as the “*Berlusconization of Mass Media*”, sometimes also referred to as “*Italianization*”.

In his thesis on the subject, Manuel Veth builds upon this concept of “Berlusconization”, but applies it to another of Berlusconi’s major enterprises: football ownership.⁹⁶

In 1986, Berlusconi bought A.C. Milan, one of Italy’s biggest teams, but that was in decline at the time, and the impact of his takeover was immediate, as he invested heavily in the club, appointing a new coach, and buying players from abroad. Under Berlusconi’s ownership, Milan became a national and international powerhouse, winning 5 of its 7 UEFA Champions League trophies, and 15 domestic trophies. Unlike any football club owner, until that point, Berlusconi tied the success of Milan to his own persona, utilizing his media group to propel both the team and himself. When Berlusconi decided to establish his own political party *Forza Italia*, in 1993, the imagery, slogans, and jingles of the party were all related to the club. The name itself, Forza Italia, was a callback to *Forza Milan!*, a football chant used to encourage the team.

Berlusconi’s success created the regime of ‘*calciocracy*’ in Italy, a term used to refer to the system where different personalities tried, and succeeded, at creating a political platform through their involvement with football.⁹⁷ In his book “*Calcio*” John Foot puts forward the idea that Berlusconi created the footprint for an entanglement between football, politics, and media, that helped business tycoons to promote their political enterprises.⁹⁸

⁹⁶K. Manuel Veth. “Selling the People’s Game: Football’s Transition from Communism to Capitalism in the Soviet Union and its Successor States” *PhD diss.* (King’s College London, 2017): 156
file:///C:/Users/55119/Downloads/example.pdf

⁹⁷John Foot, “*Calcio*” (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 326

⁹⁸*Ibid.* 361

After *Berlusconization* proved to be an efficient strategy, it quickly spread across Europe. This can be seen in Ukraine with the Surkis brothers in who own Dynamo Kyiv, and Rinat Akhmetov who owns Shakhtar Donetsk, which used this process of *Berlusconization* to take “control of football clubs and used them as vehicles to launch political careers, or as political tools to gain economic advantage⁹⁹”. While in his thesis, Veth tends to only associate *Berlusconization* with Ukrainian football, a deeper dive into Russian football ownership, especially after Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich acquired English *Premier League* team *Chelsea Football Club*, shows that eventually, Russian oligarchs also delved into the effects of *Berlusconization*, together with the *Putinism* that was already in place in the country.

2.4 Football and Nationalism in Ukraine

The case study of this dissertation concerns Russia’s association with world football, but it would be impossible to touch upon this topic without highlighting what football has represented in Ukraine for the past 60 years, and how it has been impacted and shaped by Ukraine’s relationship and proximity to Russia since the Soviet era. For that reason, this following section is a short overview of the evolution of football in Ukraine, and how it has changed, especially since the annexation of Crimea.

During the Soviet Union years, as will be further explained in Chapter 3, football, and football stadiums, became a source of Ukrainian pride and nationalism, as Olga Ruzhelnik put it “One could say that the basis of Ukrainian patriotism in the Soviet Union appeared in football stadiums in the 1960s”¹⁰⁰; after that, especially as social discomfort grew in the 1980s, caused mainly by economic stagnation, once again football was in the forefront of Ukrainian

⁹⁹Veth. “Selling the People’s Game”, 22

¹⁰⁰Olga Ruzhelnik, *Ukraine*. In: De Waele, JM., Gibril, S., Glorizova, E., Spaaij, R. (eds) *The Palgrave International Handbook of Football and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78777-0_16

nationalistic ideology, this time by fostering “anti-Moscow” units, composed of ultras of different Ukrainian football teams. At the same time, stadiums became filled with anti-Soviet antics, including yellow and blue flags, and chants which called back to the freedom of Ukraine.¹⁰¹

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both Ukraine and Russia went through a period of dismantlement of their football organizations, which was only overturned by the *Berlusconization* of the sport in both countries. What is more, as Ukraine had historically been a hub that fostered efficient football, in a few years, it was able to recall the momentum that its football scene was already displaying during the Soviet era.

For that reason, during the 2000s and 2010s, the Ukrainian Premier League (UPL), became as strong and competitive as the Russian Premier League (RPL), even if not as rich, and its main teams, Shakhtar Donetsk and Dynamo Kyiv, achieved impressive accolades, such as becoming regular participants of the UEFA Champions League, and winning the UEFA Cup.¹⁰² In 2004, Andriy Shevchenko, a former player of Dynamo, and at the time at AC Milan, won the Ballon D’Or (the most coveted individual football award in the world), becoming the third Ukrainian player to ever achieve the feat, and the first since independence. For comparison, a Russian player has only once won the award: Lev Yashin in 1963.

What is more, Ukraine, together with Poland, became the first Ex-Soviet countries to host an MSE: *EURO 2012*. While regarded in general as a positive tournament both for its organization and overall popularity with fans, posterior research regarding the competition is scarce, and mostly focused on Ukraine’s attempt at nation-branding,¹⁰³ and Western media

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Eugene Ravdin, “Snap shot: Shakhtar win the 2009 UEFA Cup” *UEFA* - May , 2016. <https://www.uefa.com/uefaeuropaleague/news/022d-0e943702561b-fafbb0657864-1000--snap-shot-shakhtar-win-the-2009-uefa-cup/>

¹⁰³In her thesis on Ukraine’s attempt at using EUROS 2012 for nation-branding, Anastasiia Klonova put forward the conclusion that, for the most part, the attempt was convoluted, and represented only a first step in Ukraine’s path to utilizing cultural events for branding. More in: Anastasiia Klonova, “The role of mega-events

coverage of non-Western events.¹⁰⁴ Even so, it was an important event for the football landscape in both nations, and for their independent sport identities, which, up until that point, were intrinsically connected to the USSR.

If EURO 2012 was the culmination of the Ukrainian football project that had begun in the 1980s, the 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea marked the beginning of the end of this process. Firstly, it meant that Ukraine lost all the teams from the affected region, which were also prohibited by UEFA to join the Russian league,¹⁰⁵ falling in a limbo that resulted in the end for some teams, while others, such as *Tavria*, became two separate teams, one playing in Russia, and the other in Ukraine.¹⁰⁶ The teams from the region do not have access to any type of European competitions, meaning that the revenue they create is not sufficient to keep clubs financially stable.

In the domestic league, even from clubs further away from the Donbas region, the impact was still enormous: the Ukrainian Premier League's first division, that up until 2014 had 16 teams, has now been reduced to 12, given how many club became financially unreliable (such as Metalist, Hoverla, Metalurh Donetsk, and Dnipro), and what is more, Ukraine's most successful club at the time, Shakhtar Donetsk, had its grounds in the Ukrainian Eastern *oblast* of Donetsk, which is part of the greater Donbas region. During the 2014 invasion, this region, which counts with the bulk of pro-Russian separatists, became the center stage of the Donbas

in country branding" *Media diss.* (Karlstads Universitet, 2012), 73 <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:538889/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

¹⁰⁴The documentary "Stadiums of Hate" produced and distributed by the BBC in 2012, and released 11 days before EURO 2012, aimed at showing supposed racism, hooliganism, and right-wing antics inside football stadiums in Poland and Ukraine, the sensationalist documentary received a lot of backlash, which raised concerns regarding media manipulation, moral panic, and western bias. More in: Magdalena Rek-Woźniak and Wojciech Woźniak, "BBC's Documentary "Stadiums of Hate" and Manufacturing of the News: Case Study in Moral Panics and Media Manipulation" *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vo. 44, issue 6 (2020) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0193723519899244?journalCode=jssa>

¹⁰⁵"Crimea clubs banned from playing in Russian league by Uefa" *BBC Sport* - December 4, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/30337628>

¹⁰⁶Shaun Walker, "Football in Crimea: the club split in two by Russia's invasion" *The Guardian* - June 11, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/11/crimea-football-russia-annexation-divided-tavria-simferopol>

War (2014-2022).¹⁰⁷ For that reason, Shakhtar was forced to move away from Donetsk, with their administration and training grounds located in Kyiv, while their home matches were to be played in Lviv (2014-2016), then Kharkiv (2017-2020), and finally Kyiv (2020-2022)¹⁰⁸. Since the beginning of the war, many Ukrainian teams, including Shakhtar, have intermittently played in Poland, when their grounds are deemed unsafe. This created an alienation between Shakhtar and its fans, mostly composed of pro-Ukraine citizens of the Donbas region who now must travel, sometimes to another country to watch their team's 'home' games.

Moreover, Shakhtar had become a nucleus for foreign players, especially Brazilians. Before the war began, out of the 25 players in the Shakhtar squad, 13 were Brazilian, and they amounted for the majority of first-team players (the 11 players who start the games regularly); but as the war dragged on, FIFA allowed foreign players playing in both Russia and Ukraine to unilaterally break their contracts and leave the countries,¹⁰⁹ which all the 13 Brazilians of Shakhtar did. It was the end of the "Brazilian experiment"¹¹⁰ for the club, and the beginning of a rebuild consisting primarily of Ukrainian players.

Nonetheless, Shakhtar has donated millions of dollars since the beginning of the war to the aid of Ukrainian soldiers and their families,¹¹¹ as well as promoted the "*Global Tour for Peace*", consisting of a series of friendly matches between the club and teams from around Europe in order to bring awareness to the war, and raise money for the war effort.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷For more information on the Donbas War: "War in Ukraine" *Council on Foreign Relations* - June 26, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

¹⁰⁸Mathias Brück, "Shakhtar Donetsk: A football club fleeing war" *DW* - April 04, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/shakhtar-donetsk-a-football-club-fleeing-war/a-61520819>

¹⁰⁹"FIFA extends and adapts temporary employment rules to address issues relating to war in Ukraine" *FIFA Media Release* - May 22, 2023. <https://www.fifa.com/legal/football-regulatory/media-releases/fifa-extends-and-adapts-temporary-employment-rules-to-address-issues-relating-to-war-in-ukraine>

¹¹⁰Jack Lang, "Inside Shakhtar Donetsk's Brazilian experiment" *The Athletic* - November 30, 2020. <https://theathletic.com/2229706/2020/11/30/shakhtar-donetsk-brazilians-scouting-recruitment-champions-league>

¹¹¹Aadi Nair, "Shakhtar Donetsk to allocate \$25 mln for aid in Ukraine" *Reuters* - January 16, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/shakhtar-donetsk-allocate-25-mln-aid-ukraine-2023-01-16/>

¹¹²Robert Summerscales, "Fans And Toys Fill Stadium As Ukraine's Shakhtar Donetsk Begin Global Tour For Peace", *Sports Illustrated* - April 10, 2022. <https://www.si.com/fannation/soccer/futbol/video/ukraines-shakhtar-donetsk-begin-global-tour-for-peace-in-greece>

Even the now well-known *Azov Assault Brigade* (also known as the *Azov Battalion*), a part of the *National Guard of Ukraine*, has its roots in football: the once-militia, formed in 2014 to fight the separatists and pro-Russian forces in Donbas, was, at the time, mostly composed of *ultras* of Ukrainian Premier League clubs.¹¹³ The battalion, which is admittedly right-wing in its inception, has been accused of being ideologically neo-Nazi by some, besides Putin himself.¹¹⁴

The political developments in the region since the invasion of Crimea in 2014 greatly impacted the structure of Ukrainian football, but also reignited the connection between football and Ukrainian patriotism: in 2021, days before the kickstart of *EURO 2020* (delayed as a result of Covid), the Ukrainian football team unveiled their uniform, which contained a print of the silhouette of the map of the country, along with the annexed region of Crimea, “We believe that the silhouette of Ukraine will give strength to the players, because they will fight for all Ukraine,” wrote in his Facebook page Andrii Pavelko, the head of the Football Association of Ukraine, “and all Ukraine, from Sevastopol and Simferopol to Kyiv, from Donetsk and Lugansk to Uzhgorod will support them in every match”.¹¹⁵ The shirt also included the words “Glory to Ukraine!” and “Glory to our heroes!” along with the print of the Coat of Arms of Ukraine, colloquially referred to as ‘the trident’.

UEFA ruled that the map reflected UN-recognized borders, and that the phrase “Glory to Ukraine!” and the trident could remain in the uniform, but the phrase “Glory to our Heroes!” had to be removed given its military significance.¹¹⁶ The uniform was considered by Russian

¹¹³R.J. Rico, “The Ultras, Azov Battalion, and Soccer From Inside Ukraine”, *Vice* - September 10, 2014. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/vvanb3/the-ultras-azov-battalion-and-soccer-from-inside-ukraine>

¹¹⁴Allan Ripp, “Ukraine's Nazi problem is real, even if Putin's 'denazification' claim isn't”, *NBC News*, March 5, 2022.

¹¹⁵Andrew Roth, “Ukraine’s football kit with map featuring Crimea causes outrage in Russia” *The Guardian*, June 7, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/07/ukraine-new-football-kit-russia-national-team-shirt-annexed-crimea>

¹¹⁶“UEFA orders Ukraine to remove phrase 'Glory to the heroes' on the inside of Euro 2020 shirt” *Sky Sports* - June 10, 2021. <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/23824/12329265/uefa-orders-ukraine-to-remove-phrase-glory-to-the-heroes-on-the-inside-of-euro-2020-shirt>

officials to be a “political provocation”, and the phrases be a callback to Nazi Germany rallying cries.¹¹⁷

In conclusion, although Russia will be the focal point of this research, it is impossible to understand the complete picture of the geopolitical implications of football policies without analyzing the countries which have been most affected by Russia’s actions, in this case, most evidently, Ukraine. But even Georgia, for example, has seen attempts made by the Russian Football Association at incorporating into the Russian Premier League, teams from the contested regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹¹⁸

This context shows that soft power initiatives do not exist in a vacuum, and that most countries, and especially Russia, will blend their actions in a mixture between soft and hard power. What is more, Russia is not the only country in the region that has used soft power strategies to better their international image and appeal to foreign audiences, and, in fact, their continuous use of hard power against ex-Soviet states has only strengthened the mass appeal of their perceived adversaries.

Conclusions:

Sports studies are a vast field that can be analyzed in a myriad of different lenses, depending on the objective of a research. What becomes clear, however, is that in every context, it is impossible to analyze the impact that sports have on society, without acknowledging the impact that politics have in sports. Even so, most governments and sports institutions try to appeal to an image of non-political engagement, which creates a disconnect between the reality of the facts, and what is publicly declared. Nonetheless, sports such as

¹¹⁷Roth, “Ukraine’s football kit with map”, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/07/ukraine-new-football-kit-russia-national-team-shirt-annexed-crimea>

¹¹⁸“Russia to Launch Football League for ‘Friendly’ Occupied, Separatist Territories”, *The Moscow Times* - July 19, 2022. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/07/19/russia-to-launch-football-league-for-friendly-occupied-separatist-territories-a78337>

football, and its immense worldwide following, have provided a platform for political leaders not only to promote themselves, but base foreign policy strategies upon, as is the case with Russia, but also others, such as Ukraine, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Moreover, sports and football diplomacy can be the result of public diplomacy and soft power policies, but they can also act as the driving force behind those efforts (as was the case with Armenia and Turkey).

It is, however, naive to disassociate football from acting in the opposite manner, as the same patriotic sentiment which drives football in the direction of diplomacy, can also be easily turned into exacerbated nationalism, xenophobia, and act as a scapegoat for political tensions.

Furthermore, while the field of sports studies in the context of social sciences has existed at least since the beginning of the 20th Century, and evolved greatly since the Cold War, there is still a disconnect between the literature pertaining political sciences in general and sports studies, which creates space for both a lack of contemplation of the sports dimension of political affairs, while also leaving much to the personal opinion of researcher or group of researchers. For that reason, this literature review served the purpose of analyzing what has been academically produced in order to bridge the gap between the subjects, but also highlight the effort that still must be made to integrate sports studies in the field of political science and international relations.

3. Brief Historical Overview of Russian Sports:

Introduction:

While the objective of this thesis is to understand how and why football has been used as an integral part of Russian foreign policy since the end of the Soviet Union, and how this has been impacted by the war in Ukraine, it is necessary to give context as to why football became so influential in modern Russian society. This is significant for two reasons: first, it gives the background on how sports came to be in Russia, and how were they influenced by the cultural and political ramifications of the time, and secondly, and most importantly, much of the framework on how sports became so intertwined with economic and political strategies, was born during the Soviet years, especially after Stalin, who understood sports as a means to achieve cultural homogenization, but also propel its soft power through sports achievements, especially in the non-aligned States, while also creating another field to ‘battle’ the United States, one where they would, for long periods of time, have the upper hand.

This chapter, then, will briefly lay out the development of sports in Russian society, while highlighting features and attributes, born out of this period, and which are still part of Russian political entanglement to sports diplomacy.

3.1 The Origins of Russian Sport (1861-1917):

In the late 18th century, with the emergence of the industrial revolution and the strengthening of the British Empire, sports, as we know them today, started to be spread in England and the colonies, but also in every country the British Empire had economic and trade relations with.¹¹⁹ This was also the case with Russia, where, from the year serfdom was

¹¹⁹Alan Bairner. *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 13

abolished (1861), British citizens living in Russia started to import sports that were being played in the Empire¹²⁰

These exchanges marked the commencement of a cultural revolution that changed how, why, and by whom sports were played and watched in Russia. Sports such as Fencing, Skiing, and Boating, which were, until then, restrained to just the highest of nobility, started to be taken up by the gentry and upper-middle class. All the while rugby, cycling, boxing, and ice hockey became increasingly accessible even to those of lower social status.¹²¹ Similarly, football was introduced in Russia by Britons, and quickly became accessible even to those ‘employed in manual labor for wages’ (the *proletariat*), as English factory owners introduced the sport as an alternative to drinking and gambling.¹²²

In the beginning, football was played by Russians and foreigners alike, and many of the football teams formed in Russia between 1880 and 1910 were composed of English, Scottish, and German employees of mills and factories, as well as Russian citizens. As the years went by, however, Russian players and spectators started to accuse football in the country to be run by foreigners who discriminated against Russian-owned and administered teams.¹²³ At the time, ‘*Sport*’, a Russian magazine that covered match reviews, wrote “Match reports will soon be crime reports. Will that gladden the hearts of Russian sportsmen? I do not think so(...) Let the Russian clubs band together and form their own league. I am sure a great future awaits soccer in Russia.”¹²⁴ On the eve of the First World War, most ‘foreign’ teams had already left Russia, while Russian teams (mostly from Moscow and Saint Petersburg) started to tour, and

¹²⁰James Riordan. *Sport in Soviet Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 9.

¹²¹Ibid. 10

¹²²Ibid. 22

¹²³Ibid. 23.

¹²⁴*Sport*. October 6th, 1903.

be visited by, teams from the rest of the Russian Empire as well as neighboring countries. By then, football was already the “most widespread of sports”.¹²⁵

3.2 Soviet Sport and Society (1917-1991)

What followed the 1917 Russian Revolution was an organization of sports not so different from that of Tsarist Russia. As the Bolshevik party tried to deal with the political turmoil and economic crisis that followed the revolution, little attention was paid to sports, classifying them as simply part of social life, and of little political interest. As author James Riordan explains in his book *Sport in Soviet Society*, sports did not play a role in the establishment of the USSR (established in 1922 with the signing of the ‘*Treaty of the Creation of the USSR*’), but rather, became, by its own right, a force in uniting the peoples inside soviet society.¹²⁶ Sports were able to evolve to such a significance in virtue of developing mass enthusiasm, allowing for self-expression, and being a ‘guiltless’ form of emotional release, compared to sex, drugs, or religion. Besides that, sports nature itself requires little intellectual knowledge in order to be played and appreciated.¹²⁷ This demonstrates that, in its roots, Soviet sports' first developments were organic, influenced mostly by societal urges, and not imbued with political strategies.

This panorama changed dramatically once Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in 1922. According to author John R. Tunis, “It was not until the advent of Stalin that the far-reaching possibilities of sport as a means of influencing and controlling the young were appreciated”.¹²⁸ Determined to break away from the *bourgeoisie* ideologically dominated sports organization, in which sports were

¹²⁵V. I. Zholdak. *Stranitsy moskovskovo sporta* (Moscow, 1969), 100

¹²⁶Riordan. *Sport in Soviet Society*, 7.

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸Tunis, “The Dictators Discover Sport”, 606. (see chap. 1, n. 53)

played as a hobby, past time, or for the sake of competition, the USSR created a new framework that quickly became synonymous with the Soviet sports establishment: *physical culture*. James Riordan explains “In the official Soviet view, sport is considered to be part of physical culture which has four components: (a) organised physical education; (b) playful activities or games; (c) all forms of (socially approved) active leisure-pursuits; and, (d) organised sport.”¹²⁹ Using the works of Karl Marx, who rejected the duality between body and mind, considering it twin parts of a single system,¹³⁰ the Soviet party based their efforts on the assumption that sports helped not only in increasing social production but also in other areas of national development.¹³¹ In this context, sports were a component of physical culture, which in its turn, was a “societal institution with a socialising function.”¹³²

The organization of physical culture, just like most aspects of Soviet life, was regulated under the regime of the Communist Party, which created the *All-Union Committee on Physical Culture and Sport* in 1922 (later known as the ‘*Sportkomitet and Goskomsport*’). The Committee was a centralized union representing and collaborating with all other physical culture associations around the USSR. Sports were characterized by *massvost* (widespread engagement) and *masterstvo* (proficiency), where the latter is a result of the former.¹³³ People of every age were encouraged to take part in physical culture, as part of social Soviet life (as most of the associations derived from workers’ unions), and, if proven that they had an exceptional talent at one specific sport, to devote themselves at perfecting their ‘craft’.

It did not take long until *massvost* showed its first positive results: by the 1956 Melbourne Olympics (the USSR joined the Olympic Committee in 1952 when it disputed its

¹²⁹Riordan. *Sport in Soviet Society*, 3.

¹³⁰Karl Marx. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859), 11-12

¹³¹Henry Morton, *Soviet Sport*. (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 112.

¹³²N. I. Ponomayrov, “Fenomen igry i sporta”, *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kul'tury*, no. 8 ,(Moscow, 1972), 6

¹³³John N. Washburn. “Sport as a Soviet Tool”, *Foreign Affairs* 34, no. 3 (1956): 494.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/20031180>.

first games), the Soviet Union got the most medals in total (98) and the most gold medals (37, in comparison to the US' 32), having the third biggest cohort of athletes, only behind the USA and hosts Australia. From those games onward, the USSR ranked first in six out of nine total appearances in the Summer Olympic Games, and seven times in nine appearances in the Winter Olympic Games. Creating another field where the USSR and the United States competed during the Cold War (1947-1991). For that reason, achievements in sports were considered as important as achievements in arts, or technology, for example.¹³⁴

Soviet scholars and Western skeptics often diverged on the language used but agreed on what was the 'ultimate goal' of physical culture. While Soviet scholars such as V. V. Belarusova argued that "The ultimate goal of physical culture in our state is to prepare the younger generation for a long and happy life, highly productive labor and for the benefit of society and for the defense of the socialist homeland"¹³⁵; American author John R. Tunis defined physical culture as having three main formative reasons: to keep young people occupied; to help with political propaganda; and to produce men and women capable and willing to defend their country.¹³⁶ In truth, it does not matter if one looks at physical culture as a societal phenomenon utilized for nation-building and strengthening, as defended by the Soviets, or believes that it is an authoritarian branch of sports militarization. The underlying argument that both visions have in common is that there is no space for non-political aspirations in physical culture. Sports in Soviet society were completely inserted into the realm of politics.¹³⁷

¹³⁴Reet Howell. "The USSR: Sport and Politics Intertwined." *Comparative Education* 11, no. 2 (1975): 137. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3097941>.

¹³⁵V. V. Belarusova, *Pedagogika* (Moscow, 1972), 182-183

¹³⁶Tunis, "The Dictators Discover Sport" 606.

¹³⁷Washburn. *Sport as a Soviet Tool*, 493. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031180>.

During Stalin's regime, and especially in the decades right after the First World War, two main features emerged in football culture in the Soviet Union. The first was not uncommon to many other areas of Soviet society: during the 1930s, numerous football players, alongside other sportsmen, Jews, and foreign residents, fell victim to Stalin's 'Great Purge'¹³⁸, having been accused of a variety of crimes against the nation such as 'counter-revolutionary activities' and treason.¹³⁹ The purges, which besides eliminating perceived political enemies of the Communist Party, also served to instill Soviet Ultrationalism, or, as explained by Russian writer Antoni Ekart "The average Russian thinks 'If *Dinamo* can beat a French team, obviously the French have even less bread and meat than we do.'"¹⁴⁰¹⁴¹

With the regime of Joseph Stalin having ended with his death in 1953, and with it many decades of institutionalized violence, physical culture became less militarized, even though no aspect of Soviet life was truly ever completely disassociated from the Communist Party and its institutions. Nonetheless, this did not apply to the role of sports usage for political propaganda, in fact, with the increase in urbanization and technological integration, sports became continuously more accessible, both for those who practiced them and to the spectators¹⁴².

Sports, thus, were a peaceful means of continuing the ideological war against bourgeois liberal nations – a war which was fueled by intense patriotism and partisanism, that could be

¹³⁸Between 1936 and 1938 Stalin and his main allies inside the Communist Party ordered the imprisonment and subsequent execution of millions of people inside the Soviet Union, including 70 per cent of the Communist Party Central Committee and 50 per cent of the Party Congress, besides thousands of army soldiers and officers. While the official death toll number is unavailable, some scholars estimate that almost 10 million people may have been killed as a direct consequence of the Great Purge. *Great Purge*. Oxford Reference.; Accessed 4 Apr. 2023. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810105021212>.

¹³⁹Riordan. *Sport in Soviet Society*, 166.

¹⁴⁰Antoni Ekart, *Vanished Without a Trace*, (London: Max Parrish, 1954): 207

¹⁴¹As shown previously in the *Literature Review*, team sports, in general, but football specifically, have the power of creating a channel between the team and the fans, where there is a symbiotic relationship between the two, and the victory of the team, means also the victory of its supporters. This might explain why the IOC has since reverted its ban of Russian and Belarussian athletes from participating in the 2024 Olympics, if they play individual sports, rather than in teams.

¹⁴²Manfred Zeller. *Sport and Society in the Soviet Union: the Politics of Football After Stalin*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 7

translated into mass identification with figures like Stalin, or the Communist Party, but also with athletes and teams, such as Dynamo or Lokomotiv.¹⁴³ The monthly physical culture magazine *Kultura i zhizn*, of the USSR, went as far as saying, in 1949, that the increasing success achieved by Soviet sportspeople was “irrefutable proof of the superiority of socialist culture over the moribund culture of capitalist states.”¹⁴⁴

From its early role as a form of entertainment for the Tzar and his court to being an instrument for the creation of patriotic ties between the Soviet nations, sports had always played a significant societal role. In this way, up until the 1950s, sports competitions were pivotal in promoting the "friendship of the Soviet peoples."¹⁴⁵ The success in both the Winter and Summer Olympics, as well as in other non-Olympic sports such as chess, were able to increase the international prestige of other countries behind the Iron Curtain, such as East Germany and Yugoslavia, besides the USSR itself. Sportspeople became 'sweat suit ambassadors'¹⁴⁶; being able to represent their country in the international arena when other political and diplomatic paths were inaccessible.

In this context, football teams became envoys of the Soviet Union, in the sense of representing the USSR, both metaphorically and literally. In 1956, as *Lokomotiv Moscow* toured Asia, and an enormous mass meeting and a parade were held for the club in Calcutta, India, attended by Soviet Leaders, Nikolai Bulganin, and Nikita Khrushchev.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, in 1954, when seven-time English champions *Arsenal Football Club*, traveled to the USSR to take on *Dynamo Moscow*, only to lose 5-0, British newspapers highlighted the "lesson in football, teamwork and fitness" displayed by the Soviet side.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³Riordan. *Sport in Soviet Society*, 182.

¹⁴⁴*Kultura i zhizn* (Moscow, 1949), 11

¹⁴⁵V. V. Rodionov. "Sport i integratsiya", *Teoriya i praktika fizicheskoi kultury*, no 9 (1975): 7

¹⁴⁶Riordan, *European Cultures in Sport*, 95

¹⁴⁷Washburn. *Sport as a Soviet Tool*, 491

¹⁴⁸"Arsenal Outplayed: A Football Lesson in Moscow" *Daily Express* (London) 1954, 1.

By the late 1950s, football was on the way to becoming the most supported sport not only in the capital, and other major cities of Russia, but also in Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine — all countries which were part of the original treaty which established the USSR, and beyond, in places like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.¹⁴⁹ This led to a golden period in Soviet football history: winning the 1956 Summer Olympics gold medal, the inaugural 1960 European Championship, and reaching fourth place at the 1966 England World Cup. In 1963, USSR and Dynamo Moscow goalkeeper Lev Yashin won the European Footballer of the Year award. He is, to this day, the only goalkeeper to ever win the coveted award. Nicknamed the “Black Spider”, he is considered by many the greatest in history on his position¹⁵⁰.

With the exponential growth of Soviet football internationally, the same started to gradually happen inside the USSR, with football clubs outside the Moscow-Saint Petersburg axis starting to arise, to varying degrees of popularity and success. As explained by Manfred Zeller in his book “*Sport and Society in the Soviet Union*”, the 1960s were the age of media and technological integration, when all Soviet households started to have increasing access to radios and televisions,¹⁵¹ and football matches having some of the highest audiences.

It is important to keep in mind, that at its height, the Soviet Union was composed of 15 Union Republics, 90 different ethnic groups, more than 87 different languages, and a population of about 285 million people.¹⁵² Football, now accessible to all, became a source of self-determination, rather than homogenization, or what was explained before to be the “friendship of the Soviet peoples”. For that reason, the Soviet football league was a way for

¹⁴⁹Riordan, *European Cultures in Sport*, 100

¹⁵⁰*Biography: Lev Yashin*. (International Olympic Committee) <https://olympics.com/en/athletes/lev-yashin>

¹⁵¹Zeller. *Sport and Society in the Soviet Union*, 7

¹⁵²*Population by sex, residence, and intercensal rates of increase for total population, each census: 1948-1997*. (United Nations: Demographic Yearbook, Historical supplement, 1997). <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/Demographic/Products/dyb/DYBHist/HistTab02.pdf>

people to organize based on their communities, in order to compete against other Soviet nations.¹⁵³

Two of the most prominent teams to emerge out of this context, and begin to gain traction in the 1960s were *Shakhtar Donetsk*, and, most importantly, *Dynamo Kyiv*, as it rapidly became one of the most successful teams in the USSR. As Dynamo grew in popularity, so did its linkage to “Soviet Ukrainianhood”,¹⁵⁴ with many fans writing letters to the teams in Ukrainian and trying to infuse the players with pride by reminding them of past Ukrainian glories before important games. As the Moscow teams were the most outstanding until that point, an idea of “*us*” versus “*them*” was born out of the rivalry between Ukrainian-based teams and their Moscovite counterparts.¹⁵⁵ But as the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, so was the USSR championship. The years directly following the end of the USSR also mark the years when football stagnated in Central and Eastern Europe. When before there was State financed support to all areas of the game, in its place what followed was a convoluted, crisis-torn region, and once again football was relegated to the backdrop of Russian society.¹⁵⁶

Conclusions:

As was shown in this chapter it becomes clear what purpose sports, and most importantly, football, played in the USSR: from its diffusion and organization in the 19th century, which led to a deeply nationalistic attachment to the sport, which was administered in a centralized, State-based manner, to later being used to create a feeling of transnational community inside the USSR, and international prestige through participation (and achievement of a number of accolades) in a myriad of competitions; one can begin to understand how this

¹⁵³Zeller. *Sport and Society in the Soviet Union*, 10

¹⁵⁴Ibid. 154

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 151

¹⁵⁶Marc Bennetts. *Football Dynamo: Modern Russia and the people's game*. (London: Virginia Books, 2008)

role was merely revitalized once Putin took over Russia, again using sports for political gains, as will be shown more in-depth in Chapter 5.

Moreover, this chapter also highlighted the role that football played in Ukraine as well, becoming a form of self-determination, and riveting the feeling of ‘Ukrainianhood’ even while under the banner of the Soviet Union. This is also a sentiment which has been incorporated into modern Ukrainian football and will explain many of the interactions and animosities that still exist in modern football, between national teams, but also internal competitions and players.

The next chapter, however, will look closely at the ‘rebirth’ of football inside modern day-Russia after the period of crisis of the 1990s, and expand on a specific characteristic born out of this period: football’s impact on economic policies, and gains. The objective is to analyze to what extent the following prediction made by James Riordan in 2003 became a reality:

It is possible that sport in such states [ex-communist countries] will become a hybrid of the worst of both worlds, retaining the grinding bureaucracy of the old and adding only the exploitation and corruption of the new. The final product may well not inspire admiration, and its advocates should keep in mind that post-Soviet market capitalism “has been by every measure far more destructive of people’s daily and long-term security and well-being than any Communist-Party policy since the end of the Second World War”¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁷Riordan, *European Cultures in Sport*, 101

4. Russian Oligarchy, Sponsorship, and the Most Lucrative Sport in the World

Introduction:

Once it is understood how football has developed under Soviet rule, and what specific characteristics the administration of the sport assumed because of that background, as well as the state of that same administration was in after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this chapter will explain two key economy-related elements that emerged in the post-Soviet Russian football scene: the involvement of oligarchs in football operations, and ownership and sponsorship deals struck by Russian (mostly State-owned) companies.

This analysis is fundamental to the understanding of how those oligarchs and companies inserted themselves into the realm of world football, and why this strategy was interesting to them from a financial point of view. Moreover, it will be discussed how this economic connection to football paved the way, and sometimes financed, the political and diplomatic efforts made by the Putin administration of using football as a tool of public diplomacy, which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Finally, this chapter will also evaluate what were the impacts of the war against Ukraine on those economic ties, and starting from the data that is now available, how were those oligarchs and companies affected.

4.1 Russian Oligarchy: How it Came to Be, and its Connections to Football:

In 1991, as the Soviet Union collapsed, a political and economic vacuum emerged where before there was only Communist Party, and what followed was a regime described as

‘clan capitalism’,¹⁵⁸ ‘violent entrepreneurship’,¹⁵⁹ and a ‘mafia state’.¹⁶⁰ The money accumulated in hard currency abroad, in an attempt to boost the Soviet economy in the 1970s and 80s, became a private asset in the 1990s, available to those who had access to the accounts, namely technocrats, high-ranking military officers, and the KGB.¹⁶¹ In this successor State of Russia, men with strong political connections, such as those in the inner social circles of Boris Yeltsin (the first president of Russia from 1991 to 1999) and Vladimir Putin, were able to acquire assets such as oil, gas, and metals, for below-market prices. Most of the government apparatus, so strong during the USSR, was sold out at a breakneck speed to whoever was the prearranged, most well-connected bidder. This ‘*Wild West*’ scenario, sometimes referred to as ‘Kleptocracy State’ (the ‘Rule of the Thieves’, in a free translation of ancient Greek), is where most of the modern Russian oligarchs made their fortunes.

One of those men was Roman Abramovich, a modest businessman from the Komi Republic, which, at only 29 years old, was able to buy, with the help of his ‘mentor’ Boris Berezovsky, a close friend of Yeltsin, and later Putin,¹⁶² the newly formed *Sibneft* (an oil production company, born out of the merging of four previously State-owned companies which all dealt with different parts of the production of gas and oil),¹⁶³ nowadays named *Gazprom Neft*, the third largest oil producing company in Russia. Further business and investments in an array of different areas only increased Abramovich’s wealth and influence. That was possible because, unlike many other oligarchs, Abramovich did not fall out of favor when Putin rose to

¹⁵⁸L. Kosals, “Essay On Clan Capitalism In Russia.” *Acta Oeconomica* 57, no. 1 (2007): 67.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40729621>.

¹⁵⁹Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvrf8b6f>.

¹⁶⁰Moisés Naím. “Mafia States: Organized Crime Takes Office.” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 3 (2012): 100.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23217970>.

¹⁶¹ Karen Dawisha. “*Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who owns Russia?*” (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014) 16

¹⁶²At first a fervent supporter of Putin, Berezovsky later became one of its main critics, to the point of exiling himself in Britain, where he died in 2013.

¹⁶³David Conn. “From poor orphan to billionaire oligarch: how Abramovich made his money” *The Guardian* - March 21, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/roman-abramovich-billionaire-oligarch-money-russia-chelsea>

power in 1999.¹⁶⁴ In fact, only a few years later, in 2005 he sold *Sibneft* back to the Russian government in a deal worth US\$ 13 billion (Abramovich had bought the company for US\$ 250 million, just 9 years before).¹⁶⁵

A little over a year before, in 2003, Abramovich rose to prominence outside of Russia for his purchase of Chelsea Football Club, a West London Premier League club. While the relevance of such an acquisition, at first, was seen simply as another of Abramovich's business ventures, in reality, the deal proved to be much more relevant to the development of Russian economic landscape and the power associated with its ruling elites, than most of the other 'kleptocratic' schemes of the 1990s.

At the time of the acquisition, Chelsea was in a deep financial crisis (besides the £70 million paid for the club, Abramovich also took responsibility for the £80 million debt the club had and spent a further £100 million in investments). In one year, the club won the domestic league, a trophy they had not won since 1954, and repeated the feat in the following year. They also dominated the domestic cups, and eventually won the UEFA Champions League in the 2011-2012 season. Abramovich was not alone in this type of enterprise, however, and as the 2000s unrolled, world football became intertwined with Russian companies and owners.

The early 2000s brought a new landscape for world football: the once strong leagues of South America were in decline, a consequence of years of corruption and bad management, and as a result, football became the most globalized it had ever been. Football players that would before spend their whole careers in São Paulo or Buenos Aires, were now being shipped across the Atlantic at a never before seen rate, for millions of dollars. This new open market

¹⁶⁴Berezovsky v. Abramovich, (2012) EWHC 2463, 304 <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/JCO/Documents/Judgments/berezovsky-judgment.pdf>

¹⁶⁵“Roman Abramovich: New evidence highlights corrupt deals”. *BBC* - March 14, 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60736185>

also meant that agents and players were no longer limited to football powerhouse cities like Madrid, Barcelona, or Milan. In fact, players were shipped to clubs that offered the best economic deals. Soon, African, and Asian players were following the same path, to the point that the European Leagues, no matter their size, started to have as many foreign players, as nationals, propelling the football landscape of Europe to a level far beyond any other region in the world.¹⁶⁶

At the same time, another steady decline in Europe left vacant the place for the most attractive and lucrative league in the continent. Consumed by scandals of corruption and match-fixing, the Italian League, which had been the most dominant between the 1980s and 1990s, excelling in international competitions, as well as attracting the best players from all over Europe and South America, had lost much of its appeal by the late 2000s, going from the best-ranked league to 4th nowadays,¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸

If the late 1980s and early 1990s were characterized by the abandonment of football in Russia¹⁶⁹, the 2000s brought in a new era of heavy investments in Russian football, both at home and abroad. Before teams were owned and administered by the State, mainly in the form of Workers Unions or the Army, they had to now find new ways to remain financially viable and stable. The solution that most teams found was to keep the patronage system that existed during the Soviet era but change the patrons¹⁷⁰. Many authors devoted their time explaining the

¹⁶⁶In 2022, two South American teams were considered “favorites” heading into the World Cup: Brazil, and eventual winners, Argentina. Out of the 52 players of those two squads, only 4 played in their own domestic leagues. All 48 others played in Europe. More in: Tim Vickery. “Argentina’s World Cup glory built in Europe as South American leagues lose importance” *ESPN* - January 6, 2022) <https://www.espn.com/soccer/argentina-arg/story/4840189/argentinas-world-cup-glory-built-in-europe-as-south-american-leagues-lose-importance>

¹⁶⁷Country Coefficient. *UEFA*. <https://www.uefa.com/nationalassociations/uefarankings/country/#/yr/2010>

¹⁶⁸“Italian clubs punished for match-fixing”, *The Guardian* - July 14, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2006/jul/14/europeanfootball.juventus2>

¹⁶⁹Marc Bennetts, *Football Dynamo: Modern Russia and the people’s game*. (London: Virginia Books, 2008), 2

¹⁷⁰Geoffrey Hosking, ‘Patronage and the Russian State’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (2008), 301 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4213055>

privatization process that happened in Russia at the time,¹⁷¹ but, as explained by Manuel Veth, this process was not as clear-cut when it comes to football. Even though the role of the State has diminished, many football clubs are still administered and/or sponsored by government-owned corporations (a clear example being that of Zenit Saint Petersburg, which is both owned and sponsored by Gazprom, the largest publicly listed natural gas company in the world).¹⁷² Nonetheless, new corporations and private shareholders also decided to delve into the patronage of teams, in a process that became even more complicated by the system of privatizations put in place by Yeltsin in the late 1990s, but that was partly undone by Vladimir Putin starting in 1999, as it was shown before with the example of *Sibneft*.

In Russia, the first team to go through this revitalization process was Spartak Moscow, which received heavy investment from *LUKoil* in 2001. LUKoil is a multinational energy corporation, the second biggest company in the country, and the biggest non-state-owned enterprise in terms of revenue. LUKoil became a sponsor of the team in 2001, and the club board, including the presidency, was composed of men associated with the company. One such man was Leonid Fedun, who was the president of Spartak between 2004 and 2022, besides being the vice president of LUKoil¹⁷³.

As president, Fedun made the administration and identity of Spartak to be almost indistinguishable from that of LUKoil, in so much so that when Fedun eventually sold his 92% share in the club, he did so to LUKoil itself, who as of 2023 is the *de facto* owner of the club. The takeover of Spartak is of significance because, besides being one the first of these new incorporation processes, it also laid the foundations for many other mega-rich owners on how to conduct their administration of a club.

¹⁷¹Andrew Barnes, *Owning Russia* (Ithaca, 2006); Anders Aslund, *Russia's Capitalist Revolution* (Washington, 2007); Lynn D. Nelson and Irina Y. Kuzes, *Radical Reform in Yeltsin's Russia* (London, 1995).

¹⁷²K. Manuel Veth. "Selling the People's Game" (see chap. 1, n. 63)

¹⁷³*Ibid.* 147

A similar process happened to *TsSKA* (also known as PFC CSKA Moscow). *TsSKA*, which, back in Soviet times, was under the administration of the Ministry of Defense, was sold to a consortium led by Evgeniy Giner, a Russian businessman who is the co-owner of the company VS Energy, and he became the president of the club.¹⁷⁴ The deal went over the investigation by UEFA, as it was suggested that one of the companies inside the consortium was owned by Abramovich's lawyer, but no confirmation was found. According to UEFA rules, no two teams can be owned by the same person, as a conflict of interest may arise in the case of those two teams playing against each other, and that did happen between Chelsea and *TsSKA* in the 2004-2005 Champions League season.

Another example is Lokomotiv Moscow, which before was owned by the Ministry of Transports, is nowadays administered by Russian Railways (*Rossiiskie zheleznye dorogi*, or *RZhD*). Similarly, to Gazprom, it is a fully State-owned, vertically integrated company that controls and administers the infrastructure of the railway service in Russia. *RZhD* was created by the Ministry of Transports but is now autonomous, and in the figure of Lokomotiv, they have one of the most successful Russian teams of the last two decades. As explained by Manuel Veth, *RZhD* could only grow through investments in foreign markets, and for that reason "football was an important means to draw attention to the resurrection of Russia's transport sector both at home and abroad".¹⁷⁵

Abroad, – besides the well-known example of Chelsea –, *AS Monaco* (France), *Cercle Brugge* (Belgium), *AFC Bournemouth* (England), and *SBV Vitesse* (Netherlands) were all bought, during the 2000s by Russian oligarchs. Besides those, Farhad Moshiri, the Iranian-British owner of Everton Football Club (a Liverpool-based Premier League club), admitted that many of his football-related decisions were made in accordance with Alisher Usmanov, an

¹⁷⁴Ibid. 150

¹⁷⁵Ibid. 152

Uzbek-Russian billionaire, who also owned as much as 30% of Arsenal Football Club, another outfit of the Premier League.¹⁷⁶

New documents leaked in 2023 and analyzed by both *The Guardian* and the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, show that Roman Abramovich was in fact funding SBV Vitesse, including a €117m secret funding during the acquisition of the club. Throughout the years, many Chelsea players played on loan for the Dutch team, prompting two investigations by the Dutch government. Both investigations were unable to prove Abramovich's connections to the club, but the newly leaked documents show that the payments came from "a series of entities registered in opaque offshore tax havens."¹⁷⁷

Enjoying the new markets which included an array of South American players, many businessmen also decided to also invest in 'shares' of a player, meaning that when said player is bought and sold between clubs, a percentage of the sale goes to whoever owns the shares on that player. One of the most famous cases of that came in 2006, with the sale of Javier Mascherano and Carlos Tevez, two Argentinian football players who played for the Brazilian club *Corinthians*, which at the time was owned by Media Sport Investment (MSI), a consortium accused of being a front organization of Boris Berezovsky,¹⁷⁸ Abramovich's close ally, business partner, and mentor. MSI was also interested in buying *West Ham Football Club*, a Premier League team, and in the summer of 2006, both Tevez and Mascherano, at the time two

¹⁷⁶David Conn. "The curious case of Farhad Moshiri, Alisher Usmanov and new money at Everton" *The Guardian* - January 25, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2017/jan/25/everton-farhad-moshiri-alisher-usmanov-new-money-ownership>

¹⁷⁷David Conn et al. "Roman Abramovich secretly bankrolled Dutch football club, leaked documents suggest" *The Guardian* - March 29, 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/29/roman-abramovich-secretly-bankrolled-dutch-football-club-leaked-documents-suggest>

¹⁷⁸Mike Anstead, "The man behind MSI" *The Guardian* - September 1, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2006/sep/01/sport.comment3>

of the most expensive players in Brazilian football history, made their way to the West London club.¹⁷⁹

This connection between Russia and the UK is due to two main reasons: first, Russian nationals have migrated to the United Kingdom in waves since as early as the 1917 revolution, then again during World War Two, and once more since the Putin administration started. This last wave, however, has less to do with the turbulent political and economic landscape of Russia, and more due to the fact that London became a ‘paradise’ for Russian oligarchs and their money. Research on the connection between the city and the oligarchs results in many sensationalist reports, but a report by *The New Yorker* tried to explain how, and why it happened. The investigation suggests that the ‘no-questions-asked’ tacit regime that existed at the time, together with the fact that an investment of £2 million in the UK was enough to guarantee a visa, while £10 million gave a person permanent residency, made the English capital a perfect target for the oligarchs¹⁸⁰.

Secondly, with the diminishing popularity of the Italian League, the English Premier League was steadily becoming the richest and most prominent league in Europe. The 2022 Deloitte Report, which analyzes the football finances of Europe’s most important leagues, shows that the Premier League has the biggest revenue, the most expensive overall wage bill, and the most lucrative sponsorship and television rights deals.¹⁸¹ The organization believes that this gap between the Premier League and other leagues such as the German *Bundesliga*, and the Spanish *La Liga*, will become even greater in the following years.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹Jim Riordan “*Football: Nation, City and the Dream. Playing the Game for Russia, Money and Power*”, *Soccer & Society*, vol. 8, issue 4, 545-560, DOI: 10.1080/14660970701440840

¹⁸⁰Patrick Keefe. “*How Putin’s Oligarchs Bought London*” *The New Yorker* - March 17, 2022
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/28/how-putins-oligarchs-bought-london>

¹⁸¹More information in: “Annual Review of Football Finance 2022” *Deloitte Business Group* - August, 2022
<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/sports-business-group/deloitte-uk-annual-review-of-football-finance-2022.pdf>

¹⁸²*Ibid.*

As explained by James Montague in his book “The Billionaire’s Club”, the ‘invasion’ of Russian tycoons in European football meant that “Millionaire local owners were not enough. Now billionaires and the super-rich were the only individuals with pockets deep enough to bankroll survival and success.”¹⁸³ Football ownership was by no means a cheap enterprise before Abramovich, but the injection of money that he was able to put into Chelsea, and the results that followed, made it clear that the turning of the millennium was going to mark a new age for investments in football.

Although this process started in Russia, it then went on to dominate European football. It did not take long for other ‘mega-rich’ entrepreneurs to invest in football teams across the continent. Nowadays, only two Premier League clubs are not owned by billionaires (*Nottingham Forest* and *Brentford*) and only three clubs are owned by British citizens (*Brentford*, *Brighton*, and *Tottenham*). Elsewhere, *PSG*, *Milan*, *Roma*, *Internazionale*, and *Lyon*, to name a few, were all bought by investors from the United States, China, the Gulf States, and beyond.

Football has become a billionaire industry that specializes in moving people and money around the globe. The 2018 Russia World Cup final reached an audience of 1.12 billion people,¹⁸⁴ and the Premier League television rights deal alone is worth £5 billion.¹⁸⁵ As the oligarchy in Eastern Europe grew richer, it was a waste of resources for them to keep investing only in Russia, and football presented itself as a stable and lucrative market abroad. Moreover, as the 2015 *FIFA Corruption Case*¹⁸⁶ showed, it is a market that has been plagued with

¹⁸³James Montague, *The Billionaires Club: The Unstoppable Rise of Football's Super-rich Owners*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018), 2.

¹⁸⁴“More than half the world watched record-breaking 2018 World Cup” *FIFA Media Release* - 21 December, 2018 <https://www.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/2018russia/media-releases/more-than-half-the-world-watched-record-breaking-2018-world-cup>

¹⁸⁵Ed Mackey, “How Premier League TV rights work and how they impact your costs and subscriptions” *The Athletic* - March 8, 2023 <https://theathletic.com/4240951/2023/03/08/premier-league-tv-rights-how-work-cost/>

¹⁸⁶The 2015 FIFA Corruption Case or *FIFA Gate* was an investigation launched by the United States federal prosecutors which indicted 11 FIFA officials (including the then FIFA President, Sepp Blatter) on charges of

corruption scandals. National policies such as the “no-questions-asked’ in the UK made such investments even easier. As we will see by the end of this chapter, however, the war in Ukraine has taken a toll on these empires.

Ownership is a more direct approach to the insertion of a person or company inside the realm of sports, as their personal brand becomes associated with a club, or franchise. Basketball superstar LeBron James, for example, owned roughly 2% in shares of Liverpool Football Club, as well as marketing and branding deals, such as a collective clothing lines, besides being constantly seen using Liverpool-related apparatus.¹⁸⁷ Even though LeBron is widely considered one of the greatest basketball players of all time, his association with a football club increased his reach in foreign markets, where basketball is not as popular, in a way that is not comparable to any other sport.

Nonetheless, while companies like Gazprom and LUKoil, as shown before, do own football clubs in Russia and abroad, their strategy in the past few decades has been more focused on sponsorship deals, rather than ownership endeavors.

4.2 Football Sponsorship: The Case of Gazprom

Gazprom became Russia's largest company in 2005 when it bought *Sibneft* from Roman Abramovich. Accompanying the turbulent changes of the time, it started as State-owned company established in 1989, under the tutelage of the *Soviet Ministry of Gas Industry*, to being privatized during the Boris Yeltsin administration, until it finally started to truly grow and thrive once Putin came into office and re-nationalize it. Nowadays, the company has

bribery, fraud and money laundering. More information in: “Nine FIFA Officials and Five Corporate Executives Indicted for Racketeering Conspiracy and Corruption” *Office of Public Affairs - US Department of Justice*: May 27, 2015 <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/nine-fifa-officials-and-five-corporate-executives-indicted-racketeering-conspiracy-and>

¹⁸⁷Emmet Gates, “LeBron James 'made £35m' from Liverpool investment as FSG sale talk continues” *Liverpool.com* - November 21, 2022. <https://www.liverpool.com/liverpool-fc-news/features/fsg-liverpool-sale-lebron-james-25568375>

subsidiaries in areas such as media, aviation, and finance, as well as a majority stake in many other smaller companies.

While, historically, Russia was not considered to be a ‘*Petronation*’ or ‘*Petrostate*’,¹⁸⁸ it did become one in the past 20 years, to assess so, one only has to look at Russia’s main exports: Crude Petroleum (\$113B), Refined Petroleum (\$81.8B), Petroleum Gas (\$37.7B), Coal Briquettes (\$19.1B), and Gold (\$19.1B).¹⁸⁹ What is more, a research conducted by Peter Rutland in 2014 found that Russia’s status as a Petrostate is becoming increasingly relevant to the construction of the national self-identity post-USSR. Especially among ordinary people, there is a “positive attitude” towards companies like Gazprom becoming part of the fabric that makes Russian society.¹⁹⁰

In the world of football, besides ownership of FC Zenit Saint Petersburg, as well as their volleyball and basketball teams, Gazprom has slowly become one of the main sponsorship partners around Europe. In 2005, Gazprom became the main sponsor for German Bundesliga side FC Schalke 04; and, three years later, they became partners with Red Star Belgrade, in the Serbian SuperLiga. In 2012, the company became partners with both Chelsea Football Club (who had won the UEFA Champions League that year), and the main sponsors of the UEFA Champions League and the UEFA Super Cup. Finally, in 2013, they signed a deal with FIFA, as an official partner for their tournaments, including the 2018 Russia World Cup.

It is important to note that out of the sponsors for UEFA and FIFA, which include companies such as Adidas, Coca-Cola, Heineken, Mastercard, and FedEx, among others, Gazprom is the only state-majority-owned corporation. Moreover, unlike the previously

¹⁸⁸Terms here referring to countries whose economies are heavily dependent on the extraction and export of natural fuels, such as oil and gas. Those terms are generally associated with Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example.

¹⁸⁹Data from: “Russia (RUS) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners” *OECD - The Observatory of Economic Complexity* <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/rus>

¹⁹⁰Peter Rutland, “Petronation? Oil, gas, and national identity in Russia”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, issue no. 31 (2015), 66, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2014.952537

mentioned companies, Gazprom is the only brand that does not offer a product for direct consumption in the customer market, in fact, their product (oil and gas) is sold directly to States. While at first glance it might look that this deal might be against the best interest of Gazprom, a further analysis into how sponsorship deals function, shows that this is not the case.

To understand the positive impact that sponsorship has on a company, first one must understand what its definition is. According to Hardy, Mullin, and Sutton sponsorship is the “acquisition of rights to affiliate or directly associate with a product, person, organization, team, league, or event [...] for the purpose of deriving benefits related to that affiliation or association”.¹⁹¹ Once established what sponsorship is, the analysis should then be of what is the actual impact of this marketing strategy, given that Gazprom’s deal with UEFA alone, was worth more than €40 million per season.¹⁹² Besides the more obvious benefits, such as company exposure, which could lead to an increase in consumption of a service or product (as established earlier this is *not* the case with Gazprom), a study conducted by Vredenburg *et al.* discovered that sponsorship, unlike simple sports advertisement, is a long-term investment that helps in strengthening the public’s association of a brand with the sponsored event or team, while also increasing brand awareness and helping in building a company’s image.¹⁹³

In the case of football, throughout the years, it became customary to refer to certain competitions or leagues by its main sponsor’s name, such as the old “Copa *Santander* Libertadores, the “*Toyota* Cup”, and “*Serie A Tim*”. Stadia went through the same process, and the Juventus Stadium, for example, became the *Allianz Stadium*, or the Arsenal Stadium,

¹⁹¹Bernard James Mullin, Stephen Hardy and William Anthony Sutton, “*Sport Marketing*.” (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2014), 385

¹⁹²Simon Evans “UEFA cancel Gazprom sponsorship deal” *Reuters* - February 28, 2022
<https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/uefa-cancel-gazprom-sponsorship-deal-source-2022-02-28/>

¹⁹³Jessica Vredenburg, et al. Sport sponsorship, brand association and regulation: Tobacco firms using classical conditioning theory to skirt regulation. *International Journal of Public Law and Policy*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2015): 3, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282487323_Sport_sponsorship_brand_association_and_regulation_Tobacco_firms_using_classical_conditioning_theory_to_skirt_regulation

known as the *Emirates Stadium*, or Zenit, which plays in the Krestovsky Stadium, known as *Gazprom Arena*.

For that reason, it is not far-fetched to understand Gazprom as a branch of Russian identity, when, in fact, many other countries such as the United States and *Ford Motor Company*, Japan and *Toyota Motors*, and South Korea and the *Samsung Group*, are all examples of the merging of a nation and a company in a society's collective understanding. While there are many political and financial risks that can be brought by such an association, if said company is involved in a scandal, for example, it also creates unique opportunities for public diplomacy. That is why these sponsorship deals were invested in: to create a familiarization of Gazprom in foreign markets.

In fact, if the deals with Schalke 04 and Red Star Belgrade are more closely analyzed, there is an argument to be made about how they served a diplomatic role, rather than a purely commercial one. The year in which Gazprom signed their deal with Schalke, 2006, for the company's logo to start appearing in the team's shirt starting in the 2007 season, also marks the beginning of the construction of the *Nord Stream 1* –an offshore natural gas pipeline that connected Russia and Germany through the Baltic Sea, bypassing countries like Ukraine and Poland–; while the deal with Serbia's Red Star Belgrade, in 2010, followed by attempts to buy the club between 2013 and 2014 (which were unsuccessful due to Serbia's intention to join the EU), also coincided with Russia's, through Gazprom, attempt at building the *South Stream*, a project similar to that of the Nord Stream 1, that aimed at transporting natural gas from Russia to countries in Eastern Europe, such as Serbia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. The plan for the South Stream, however, was abandoned after Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Lastly, Gazprom's connection with football can also be seen in the administration of European football: Alexander Dyukov, chairman of the management board of Gazprom Neft,

and President of Zenit Saint Petersburg between 2008 and 2017 was appointed as President of the Russian Football Union in 2019 and was elected as a member of the UEFA Executive Committee in 2021.

Gazprom, then, became the embodiment of Russian soft power, by representing a strong and healthy company, which has direct relations to the government itself, but that also has permeability inside European markets by investing in cultural affairs rather than strictly business-related ones.

In order to not fall into the realm of speculation or sensationalism, what can be asserted about Russia's economic involvement with football, in general, and Gazprom's, more specifically, is that it has helped to build both routes for public diplomacy, and solidify Gazprom's public image as a European brand, rather than a strictly Russian one.

4.3 The War in Ukraine and its Impact on Russian Football Economy

On March 5th, 2022, less than 15 days after Russia started its invasion of Ukraine, Chelsea Football Club traveled to Lancashire to play against Burnley Football Club, for a match valid for the English Premier League. Before kick-off, as a minute of applause was being held in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, Chelsea fans started chanting the name of the then-owner of the club, Roman Abramovich.¹⁹⁴

Three days before that match, on March 2nd, Abramovich declared that the team was up for sale. This came after the oligarch was threatened by the United Kingdom government with heavy sanctions on his assets, given his proximate ties with Vladimir Putin.

¹⁹⁴Simon Evans, "Chelsea fans chant Abramovich's name during Ukraine solidarity gesture" *Reuters*- March 5, 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/chelsea-fans-chant-abramovichs-name-during-ukraine-solidarity-gesture-2022-03-05/>

Those threats became a reality two months later, as the club was finally sold on May 30th, to a consortium of American investors, led by businessman Todd Boehly, in a deal worth more than 3 billion dollars.¹⁹⁵ The oligarch's net worth, estimated at US\$15 billion in 2021, dropped to US\$6.9 billion by April 2022.¹⁹⁶ The sale, seemingly closed this chapter on the history of Abramovich's tenure in English Football, with Chelsea Football Club legend John Terry hailing Abramovich as "The best owner in the world".¹⁹⁷

Roman Abramovich was not the only man to suffer the consequences of the sanctions imposed by governments around Europe in the assets of Russian oligarchs and companies. In fact, while there was a general perception, as the war began, that it would be very difficult to cut ties with Russian enterprises, being ownership or sponsorship deals, as the weeks passed, popular demand for sanctions and terminations of contracts continued to grow, eventually pushing governments to a point of no return.

Out of the clubs that were owned by Russian businessmen, only AS Monaco remains in the hands of the Rybolovlev family, while Chelsea, Vitesse, and Bournemouth were all acquired by American consortiums in deals that show an increase in the United States' interest in this ever-growing market.

Moreover, on the day FIFA and UEFA released their statements banning Russian clubs from international competitions, they also unilaterally terminated their deals with Gazprom, which was then followed by Schalke 04 also terminating its sponsorship deal. Red Star Belgrade, however, has already signaled multiple times that it will not get rid of Gazprom as

¹⁹⁵As Abramovich's assets were, and continue to be, frozen at the time of the sale, the money made from the transaction was transferred to a bank account to which the billionaire has no access to, and will be "donated to charity". More information on: *Statement from the Board of Directors of Chelsea Football Club Limited* (May 30, 2022) <https://www.chelseafc.com/en/news/article/statement-from-board-of-directors-of-chelsea-football-club-limit>

¹⁹⁶Justin Birnbaum. "The World's Richest Sports Team Owners 2022: Abramovich Drops Off As Ballmer Rises" *Forbes* - April 5, 2022 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/justinbirnbaum/2022/04/05/the-worlds-richest-sports-team-owners-2022-abramovich-drops-off-as-ballmer-rises/?sh=29227c445a04>

¹⁹⁷John Terry. (@johnterry.26). "As we enter into a new era under new ownership" Instagram, August 12, 2022. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChPG2P2v2gO/>.

their main sponsor. When confronted with Red Star's decision, UEFA declared that it had no intention of forcing the club to break the deal, as it was "a matter for individual clubs (to deal with)".¹⁹⁸ In fact, since the beginning of the war, Red Star has played two friendlies against Zenit Saint Petersburg (losing both matches by an aggregate score of 5-2) and their fans have chanted "*Russia, Russia, Russia!*" during games of the Serbian SuperLiga.¹⁹⁹

Nonetheless, there is one industry that has been able to avoid most sanctions: online betting. Online gambling was banned in Russia until 2015, but since then, it has become an expanding industry (both in the licensed and unlicensed market). In 2018 alone, this specific market was worth more than US\$2 billion in Russia. *Fonbet*, the largest sports betting company operating in Russia, had sponsorship deals with Real Madrid, AC Milan, and PSG, but the partnerships were reported as 'suspended' in March 2022. On the website of all three teams, however, the company is still listed as an official partner, with no mention of the suspension.²⁰⁰ Most importantly, the reach that such companies have outside of Europe, sponsoring teams, leagues, and competitions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, remains unscathed as the war continues. As will be shown, in these places, the appeal for cutting ties with Russia is not as strong as it is in Western Europe, or the NATO member states.

Russian betting companies are less affected by boycotts and sanctioning for two main reasons: first, it is increasingly difficult to pinpoint the exact location where these companies are based. *1xBet*, for example, one of the companies that invest most heavily outside of Europe, is owned by three Russian businessmen, Sergey Krechetov, Dmitry Kazorin, and Sergey

¹⁹⁸Constance Kampfner, "Rangers' opponents Red Star Belgrade stick with Gazprom" *The Independent* - March 5, 2022 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/rangers-opponents-red-star-belgrade-stick-with-gazprom-h58gcwjrz>

¹⁹⁹Sportski Zurnal, "*Delije na meču protiv Voždovca skandirale u slavu Rusije i Srbije*", online video, 0:24, March 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JBRouxILB8&t=8s>

²⁰⁰Real Madrid: <https://www.realmadrid.com/en/about-real-madrid/the-club/sponsors/fonbet>; PSG: <https://en.psg.fr/teams/club/content/fonbet-becomes-paris-saint-germains-official-regional-partner-in-russia-and-the-cis-region>; AC Milan: <https://www.acmilan.com/en/news/articles/sponsor/2021-01-26/ac-milan-announces-fonbet-as-official-partner>

Karshkov, they have, however, registered the company in Cyprus, where they live (as do many other Russian oligarchs) and the license for the business is based in Curaçao. This pattern repeats itself in almost all other companies. Secondly, many data companies, such as *Sportradar*, *BetConstruct*, and *Stats Perform*, which sell sports-related data to bookmakers, have refused to stop providing their services to Russian companies, citing that the conduction of their business will not be affected by the conflict.²⁰¹

While this market is certainly not as lucrative as other Russian endeavors in the world of sports, it is a growing market and one that might show the inefficacy of trying to cut Russia and Russians completely from world football.

Conclusions:

As was shown throughout this chapter, with the collapse of the athletic institutions in the 1990s, football became a way to pursue economic and political capital in the chaos that ensued. As the system of ‘grab-zation’²⁰² (*prikhvatizatsiia*) took over Russia, and the first oligarchs emerged, James Riordan argues that those men took over western football, with their new excess wealth, sponsoring and owning teams in order to gain healthier, more amicable images. Football was the perfect escape valve, as it is the most diffused and followed sport in the world.²⁰³

As Riordan predicted, “sport in such states [ex-communist countries] will become a hybrid of the worst of both worlds retaining the grinding bureaucracy of the old and adding only the exploitation and corruption of the new”,²⁰⁴ because while Yeltsin treated football as

²⁰¹Brad Allen, “Sports Betting Data Giants Still Serving Russia Despite War Backlash *Legal Sports Report* - April 4, 2022 <https://www.legalsportsreport.com/66980/sports-betting-data-companies-serving-russian-sportsbooks/>

²⁰²‘Grab-zation’ here is used to summarize what was the corrupt system of privatizations under Boris Yeltsin, more information in: Serhiy Kudelia, and Taraz Kuzio, ‘Nothing personal: explaining the rise and decline of political machines in Ukraine’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, issue no. 31, vol. 3. (2014), DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2014.920985.

²⁰³Riordan, “Football: Nation, City and the Dream” (see chap. 3, n. 157)

²⁰⁴Riordan, *European Cultures in Sport*, 101

any other enterprise which could be run privately, Putin saw the power that existed in controlling football more closely, and rather bureaucratically.

What is more, the Russian State understood that by re-nationalizing Gazprom, they would have a company that served for more than just cooperative relations but acted also as a source of soft power. This, however, would only work if this company had the acceptance of other markets, namely the European. What they did to achieve this goal was, as seen before, *sportswash* Gazprom, through ownership sponsorship deals.

Moreover, added to that older almost Stalin-like way of controlling football, Russia was also going through a period of extreme corruption, conducted especially by those closer to political power, namely the oligarchs, which, under the umbrella of Putin, were able to thrive in their football endeavors.

Furthermore, for at least two decades, the Russian government itself had successfully used football for its benefit. Football was a tool in their public diplomacy arsenal and one that had a reach from the highest governmental administration, in the form of Vladimir Putin, to the common people who support their teams in the stadiums, or by watching the games in their living rooms.

Having said that, it becomes clear, however, that this institution has been almost completely dissolved by the war, and by being so reliant on the public's perception, and acceptance, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for Russia to reestablish itself in the world of sports, to a similar level to that they have enjoyed up until 2021. With the clubs having been sold, and the sponsorship deals substituted for other companies, even if Russian businessmen or companies have an interest in reinstating themselves in the market, in the foreseeable future, there will be almost no space to do so, compared to what they enjoyed in the early 2000s.

While Russian oligarchs paved the way for this new era that football is currently inserted in, nicknamed by John Montague the "Billionaire's Club", their monopoly on it was

short-lived, and, in fact, with the 2021 takeover of Newcastle United by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia, where the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud is a chairman, there are indications that the business surrounding football will only keep rising in both investment and possible gains. The PIF's wealth is among the largest in the world, with an estimated asset of £514 billion.²⁰⁵ The United States, China, and the Gulf States, in particular, have all begun to occupy the spaces that were once dominated by Russia and to create new business strategies, with their own 'oligarchs'. Todd Bohely, who took over from Abramovich as the president of Chelsea has already spent almost a billion dollars in signings over only two transfer windows. Nonetheless, he has failed to emulate Abramovich's winning prowess, and on his first season presiding over the team, Chelsea has neither qualified for any European competitions, nor finished in the top half (above 10th place) of the Premier League table.

Additionally, the investigation on SBV Vitesse, that found Abramovich's secret funding might also be the first in a series of new investigations that will look closely at the acquisition and administration of Russian-owned teams in the past decades. The same Vitesse had been investigated twice before the war, but this third new investigation showed concrete evidence of the corruption scheme. It is impossible to foresee the result of the ongoing investigations, but one can look at the processes, and consequent results of the *Calciopoli*²⁰⁶ and *2015 FIFA Corruption Scandal* to understand the depth and challenges of this kind of process.

The objective of this chapter was to show how football was intricately sewn into the Russian economy, and the reasons behind it, and to explain the collapse that it faced after the

²⁰⁵Public Investment Fund Website: <https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/Pages/Homepage.aspx>

²⁰⁶ For more information on Calciopoli, the 2000s corruption scandal surrounding some of Italy's most prominent football clubs: Shamooun Hafez, "Calciopoli: The scandal that rocked Italy and left Juventus in Serie B" *BBC Sport* - October 5, 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/49910626>

invasion of Ukraine. The next chapter will expand on the political connection that football, and most importantly, football administration, had with the Russian State.

5. Russian Politics and Football: The Power of Hosting a World Cup.

Introduction:

Chapter 4 aimed at giving context at how Russia, through oligarchs and State-owned companies, has inserted itself in the international football scene. By virtue of their ownership and sponsorship deals, the country became a major player, and financier, of world football. This following chapter, then, has the intention of explaining how the connections made through economic deals created a path for Russia to infuse football with their political strategies. In other words: how the economic insertion of Russia into football, became a political insertion too, which culminated in the 2018 World Cup, described by Gianni Infantino as the best World Cup ever, and that “Everyone has discovered a beautiful country, a welcoming country, full of people who are keen to show to the world that what maybe is sometimes said is not what happens here”.²⁰⁷

Chapter 5, then, will be divided into three main sections: the first will give an overview of the 2014 Sochi Olympics; the second will analyze the 2018 World Cup from a political point of view; and finally, the third part will be an evaluation of the role of sporting organizations, namely FIFA and UEFA, in the region.

²⁰⁷Brian Homewood, “Infantino says 2018 World Cup is the best-ever”, *Reuters* - July 1, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-worldcup-fifa-infantino-idUSKBN1K31IG>

When it comes to hosting Mega Sporting Events (MSE), such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, Professor Simon Rofe explains:

States can reach millions if not billions of people across the world as audiences through... MSE. Given their transnational character they allow for the dissemination of 'public diplomacy' – to win the 'hearts and minds'... on a grand scale and in more pervasive means than individually or nationally focused programmes...When traditional diplomacy (be it international or domestic) does not appear to provide an avenue for change, athletes and others have used the tremendous audiences at sporting events as a platform for their message...²⁰⁸

Since 1999, when Putin first came into power, he has understood the power posed by MSE, and, in the 2010s, in a period of only 4 years, Russia hosted not just the World, but the Olympic games too.

To understand what the 2018 World Cup represented, and how it was organized to reflect the 'beautiful' and 'welcoming country', as described by Infantino, one must look at the MSE that preceded it.

5.1 The 2014 Sochi Olympic Games

Throughout this essay, there has been an analysis of what is generally understood as soft power, and how political scientists, such as Nye, define as the objectives and possible advantages in deploying this strategy, but while this gives a more general and broad view of the subject, it is important to understand what Vladimir Putin, and his administration, understood soft power as. This understanding is significant, because, as it will be more elaborated further in this chapter, most of Russia's soft power, and public diplomacy, emanates

²⁰⁸J, Simon Rofe, *Sport and diplomacy*, Key Studies in Diplomacy MUP Series (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2018)

directly from the State. What is more, similarly to Soviet times, the strategy of the Russian State relies heavily on the political agenda of each individual head of State, and not a continuous political strategy over a period, independent from the leader. That being the case, as Putin was addressing his ambassadors and representatives of International Organizations, after being elected as president of Russia again in 2012, he defined in his speech, what was his understanding of soft power, and therefore, his administration's:

‘Soft power’ is all about promoting one’s interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one’s country, based not just on its material achievements but also its spiritual and intellectual heritage. Russia’s image abroad is formed not by us and as a result it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country or Russia’s contribution to global civilization, science and culture.²⁰⁹

Moreover, in an article written during his electoral bid for the presidency, in which he discussed foreign policy strategies, Putin once again described his vision of what was soft power.

The notion of "soft power" is being used increasingly often. This implies a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence. Regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹Vladimir Putin, “Speech at a meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organizations”, *Kremlin* – 9 July, 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15902>

²¹⁰Vladimir Putin, “Vladimir Putin on Foreign Policy: Russia and the Changing World” *Valdai* - February 27, 2012, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_on_foreign_policy_russia_and_the_changing_world/

Overall, this is a noteworthy assessment, as it shows a clear distinction between Nye's and Putin's understanding of soft power. While Nye suggests soft power is a tool of attraction, Putin describes it as a 'lever of influence'.²¹¹ What is more, it shows that Putin saw the need to better the Russian image abroad and understood soft power as a way to do so. Putin, unlike Nye, also understood that there is a point where a country's soft power can cause harm to another country's right of self-preservation and wanted to avoid that to happen to Russia.

It is in this context, that two years after being reelected to the presidency, Putin brought the world to Russia to witness its first MSE since the *1980 Moscow Summer Olympics*.

While the Summer Olympics tends to gather a bigger following, for including sports which are more traditional in the *Global South*, the Winter Olympics is especially prominent amongst European, North American, and Asian countries, where most Russia's political allies, and rivals, are located. For that reason, the impact of Sochi 2014 cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, the event became the most expensive in the history of the Olympic Games, at an estimated cost of US\$51 billion (surpassing the US\$44 billion spent by China in the 2008 Summer Olympics). Even so, as IOC President Thomas Bach said in an event in 2015:

The Olympic Winter Games, Sochi 2014, were a great success. The Russians provided seamless organisation... Sochi promised excellent sports venues, outstanding Olympic Villages and impeccable organisation. It delivered all that it promised. The athletes themselves praised every aspect. The highest compliment that I can pay – as I said at the Closing Ceremony – was that these were the athletes' Games. One year after the Games, it is clear that Sochi provided many lasting legacies.²¹²

²¹¹Andreia Soares e Castro, "The 2018 FIFA World Cup: The Gains and Constraints of Russia's Soft Power of Attraction Through Football and Sports" *Public Diplomacy of the Rising and Regional Powers*, Vol.3, Issue 3, (2018), 17-37 <https://risingpowersproject.com/fifa-world-cup-2018/>

²¹²"One year on – IOC President praises Sochi success" *IOC* - February 9, 2015. <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/one-year-on-ioc-president-praises-sochi-success>

Even with the expenses, which rose from an initial estimate of US\$14 billion, to its final US\$51 billion, Sochi was able to put on a net positive of US\$2 billion for Russia. Most importantly, however, was the message that Russia was trying to send: the Games were a priority to the government, but they were especially a priority to Putin himself, who closely accompanied most of the organization process. As Fiona Hill put it, Sochi was “a great success for the Russian Federation” and was “very much about Vladimir Putin and Vladimir Putin’s new Russia.”²¹³

Despite that, during the closing ceremony of Sochi 2014, which counted with an appearance from *Misha*, the Bear, the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics mascot, who became a symbol of Soviet sport and culture around the world for decades, a Russian invasion of the Eastern Ukrainian region of Crimea was already underway. Some pointed out the similarities to what had happened in 2008, when Russia’s invasion of Georgia happened during the final days of the Beijing Olympic Games.²¹⁴

The response from the international community to the annexation mostly came in the form of economic sanctions and political isolation, *e.g.*, moving the G8 Summit, scheduled to be held in Sochi later that year, to Brussels, and to conduct it without the participation of Russia. Yet, the overall response was meek, especially when it comes to international sports institutions, such as the IOC, which did not uphold Russia to the Olympic truce commitment, even though it is considered a pillar of the Games since antiquity.

²¹³Fred Dews, “Sochi Olympics a Big Success for Russia and Putin” *Brookings* - February 24, 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sochi-olympics-a-big-success-for-russia-and-putin/>

²¹⁴Peter Dickinson, “The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin’s green light” *Atlantic Council* - August 7, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/>

The invasion, and consequent annexation of Crimea, considered by Putin merely a “historical justice”²¹⁵ of returning the region to Russia, proved to not be enough to tint the legacy of the 2014 Olympics, as shown by the assessment of the games by the IOC on its first anniversary. Moreover, while the international political community debated what was the best course of action to take concerning the annexation, the landscape of sports, and especially football in the Crimean region changed drastically as a result of the struggle in the region, bringing back the frail, and at times violent relationship that existed between Ukrainian and Russian football since even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The 2014 Sochi Games proved to be extremely important for Russia’s international image, especially in the geographical context in which the country is inserted; but the 2018 World Cup was one step beyond, a truly global event of the most popular sport in the world.

5.2 The 2018 World Cup

This section of the chapter will focus on the *2018 FIFA World Cup* and will be divided into three sections: the first looking at the context as to why and how was the tournament held in Russia and what were the political objectives in hosting this specific MSE; the second will detail the unfolding of the tournament; while the third part will analyze what was the impact of the World Cup after it happened, both domestically and internationally, and if the objectives set out during the organization of the tournament were ever met.

²¹⁵Shaun Walker, “In 2014, Russia’s Olympian efforts were dwarfed by Ukraine crisis” *The Guardian* - December 31, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/31/2014-year-review-russia-olympics-ukraine-vladimir-putin>

5.2.1 The Road to the 2018 World Cup: Hosting Rights, Organization, and Objectives.

While Sochi was considered a success, the annexation of Crimea in the days following the event left Russia politically isolated, and once again bearing the title of a hard power-driven nation. Nonetheless, even with calls for the World Cup to be awarded to another country as a result of the invasion, FIFA decided to move forward as originally planned. Being so, the World Cup was another chance for the Putin administration to bring to the center stage its public diplomacy and soft power strategies, and this time, with a MSE that would take part all around the country, rather than in just one city in the considered ‘European’ part of Russia.

While the World Cup is a 30-day event that happens every four years, the amount of organization needed for the event is massive, for this reason, countries are awarded with hosting rights almost a decade before it is scheduled to happen, as it was with Russia, which was awarded as the host country of the 2018 World Cup in 2010. Some, including then Prime-Minister of the UK, James Cameron, accused the process of being rigged with corruption,²¹⁶ and a *dossier* from the US Department of Justice pointed at a bribing system that was used by both representatives of Qatar (awarded the 2022 World Cup) and Russia, to get votes from the FIFA officials.²¹⁷ Yet, for the purpose of clarity and consistency, I will take into consideration the internal investigation that was conducted by FIFA, and that cleared both countries of any misconduct during the process. Nonetheless, for the sake of full disclosure, it is important to show that there were, and still are, parallel investigations regarding these two countries.

²¹⁶“Russia won bid to host 2018 World Cup by corruption, says David Cameron” *The Independent* - April 17, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/world-cup/russia-world-cup-2018-bid-david-cameron-corruption-a8309671.html>

²¹⁷Tariq Panja and Kevin Draper, “U.S. Says FIFA Officials Were Bribed to Award World Cups to Russia and Qatar” *The New York Times* - April 6, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/sports/soccer/qatar-and-russia-bribery-world-cup-fifa.html>

In 2008, the year Russia started its bidding process for the World Cup, the president was Dmitry Medvedev, a close ally of Putin's (later it became clear that Putin was still the head of the administration, but this time as Prime Minister, rather than president). Moreover, even with the invasion of Georgia, this period marked a bettering of the relationship between Russia and the *West*, especially the European Union, and the United States. To some, it looked like Russia was finally abandoning the state of isolationism that it had been under the Yeltsin and first few years of the Putin administration.²¹⁸

In fact, when it came to infrastructure regarding the sports in Russia, the late 2000s started a sharp *u turn* into what was the main trend since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Vitaly Mutko, one of Putin's closest allies, became Minister of Sport (2008-2016) and later Deputy Prime Minister (2016-2020), receiving budgets not seen since the height of the Soviet period, and being bestowed by Putin the task to guarantee the success of the World Cup bid. During his years as Minister of Sport, Mutko became one of the most influential figures inside Putin's cabinet.²¹⁹ Moreover, the Russian State was used in order to accommodate Putin's investment in sports. Between 2000 and 2019, 259 legislative acts regarding sports were passed, and a new State budget, specifically for sports, was created in 2011, with 162.9 billion rubles allocated in the first year, and 331.4 billion rubles in 2019 (the last year that budget allocation information is available).²²⁰ On top of that, Russian oligarchs were also included into this mechanism, with Putin expressing many times that people like Abramovich, who was also part of the bidding process for the World Cup, were expected to finance those MSE, as well as the big State-owned companies, such as LUKOil and Gazprom.²²¹ In turn, most of the oligarchs

²¹⁸Spencer Kimball, "Russia's relations" *DW* - November 15, 2010, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-juggles-its-developing-partnerships-with-the-west-and-china/a-6162006>

²¹⁹Rebecca R. Ruiz, "Russia Sports Minister Promoted to Deputy Prime Minister" *The New York Times* - October 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/20/sports/vitaly-mutko-russia-sports-minister-promoted-to-deputy-prime-minister.html>

²²⁰Richard Arnold, ed. *Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup*. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 241.

²²¹Tom Parfitt, "Vladimir Putin tells Roman Abramovich to pay for World Cup 2018" *The Guardian* - December 5, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/05/abramovich-putin-world-cup>

closest to Putin's cabinet were awarded with lucrative procurements in order to build stadia and other sports-related infrastructure.

But why was there such an investment in sports in general, during this period? The answer may lie on how much the Russian administration relies on the figure of a single, charismatic leader, which in turn, relies heavily on domestic approval. In other words, "one of the problems with such a charismatic style of leadership is that it needs new sources of inspiration and legitimacy to sustain itself."²²² Consequently, Putin's approval rate throughout all the bidding processes for both MSE was around 80%, only bettered once the annexation of Crimea was underway in 2014 (89%).²²³

There has been a continuous debate as to why, since the 2000s, and especially in the 2010s, developed nations have been less-than-willing in hosting MSE's, especially the FIFA World Cup, which in a period between 2006 to 2022, has only been hosted once, Germany 2006, in the *Global North*. Some research that has been done on the topic, suggest that the hosting of a MSE has been used to push the approval rating of political administration's, besides creating less bureaucratic routes to increased spending in infrastructure projects connected with the event, or as the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Paes said, regarding the hosting of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games "The Olympics pretext is awesome; I need to use it as an excuse for everything."²²⁴

For that reason, it is argued, the hosting of MSE has been especially keen in developing countries, where the organizational costs, and possible negative net spend, do not outweigh the perceived gains from hosting rights, and having that event associated with the political

²²²Richard Arnold, ed. *Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup*. 26.

²²³"Do you approve of the activities of Vladimir Putin as the president (prime minister) of Russia?" *Statista* - August 1, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/>

²²⁴Jules Boykoff, "Russia's 2018 World Cup run is over, but Putin — and dictators everywhere — are still big winners at mega-sports events" *NBC News* - July 10, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/russia-s-2018-world-cup-run-over-putin-dictators-everywhere-ncna890056>

administration of the time. Recently, this has been the case with all the BRICS countries, apart from India.²²⁵ It should be mentioned, however, that India has its own soft power strategy, successfully built over decades, in the form of *Bollywood*.²²⁶

Author Jules Boykoff also points out that even in Europe this has been the case, in the smaller scale of continental competitions. For example, the *European Games*, a competition akin the Olympic games but consisting of countries from the European Olympic Committee, has had three editions since its inauguration: Azerbaijan (2015); Belarus (2019); and Poland (2023).²²⁷

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that MSE can bring about the same benefits for developed countries, and the fact that these nations started hosting MSE coincides with an effort made by sports organizations in general to make sports more globally accessible, bringing the games to places, such as the 2010 South Africa, and 2022 Qatar World Cup, where they had never been hosted before. Like *sportswashing*, the phenomenon of autocracies, or less-democratic countries, hosting MSE is a fact, but that does not need to equal an inherent flaw which should disqualify potential hosts. What is a problem is if human and labor rights abuses happen during the organization or unfolding of a sports event, and the organization responsible for it does not act accordingly, as will be shown as to have been the case with the 2018 World Cup. Those abuses, however, can happen in any country, independently of its political system, as has already happened with the organization for the 2026 USA-Canada-

²²⁵Nina Kramareva, "An Analysis Of Russia's 'alternative' Soft Power Strategy And National Identity Discourse Via Sports Mega-Events" *University of Birmingham Research Archive* - 2018.

1. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/161935936.pdf>

²²⁶Aman Kumar, "The Popularity of India's Cinema and the Role of Soft Power" *CSPS* - <https://cspsindia.org/the-popularity-of-indias-cinema-and-the-role-of-soft-power>

²²⁷Jules Boykoff, "Russia's 2018 World Cup run"

Mexico World Cup, where the largest federation of US labor unions raised concerns over labor rights in the fully democratic country.²²⁸

5.2.1 The Unfolding of the 2018 World Cup

At its core, the World Cup is a tournament where teams from all over the world compete against each other in a series of 90-minute matches, and while, supposedly, any team has the potential to win the competition. Realistically, however, only a few nations can consistently challenge for the main prize, and, since the 1960s, Russia has not been one of these nations. Even so, with the support of the fans at home, the Russian national team not only did not become the first host nation to lose the opening game (a resounding 5-0 victory against Saudi Arabia), they also fared better than the majority of specialists had anticipated, making out of the group stages, eliminating Spain in the round of eight, and falling only at the quarter-finals (the same round as favorites, and 5-time World Cup winner Brazil), against Croatia, which finished the tournament as runners-up.

While this is the sporting context of what was the 2018 World Cup, the social and political aspect was much more complex. During the tournament, even though many Western heads of State decided to not travel to Russia as a protest against the annexation of Crimea, Putin was able to host diplomatic events with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, where they discussed their increased cooperation in areas such as oil prices; UN-Secretary General António Guterres; South-Korea's President Moon Jae-in; North Korean official Kim Yong Nam; Ilham Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan, among others.²²⁹

²²⁸Michael Sainato, "Largest US union federation presses Fifa on labor rights around 2026 World Cup" *The Guardian* - April 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/apr/08/afl-cio-labor-union-demands-2026-world-cup>

²²⁹Anastasia Petrova, "International Sport as Cultural Diplomacy" *Berlin Global* - April 15, 2019, <https://www.berlinglobal.org/index.php?international-sport-as-cultural-diplomacy>

To the world, they were able to show an organized, multicultural, and welcoming event, for more than 3 billion combined viewers at home,²³⁰ and about 3 million tourists in Russia. To accommodate the fans willing to see the tournament in person, Russia relaxed its visa policies, which are normally exceedingly bureaucratic, to allow any person with tickets to at least one game to enter the country.²³¹ The *FIFA Fan Festival* zones (public viewing events promoted in the host cities), attracted a record 7.7 million people throughout its 30 day-span. The World Cup also brought about new infrastructure to Russia, in the form of stadiums, public transportation, connectivity projects between cities, and tourism infrastructure. The overall organization of the tournament was also praised by FIFA as well as attendees, with one saying: “they made sure that the organisation of sports events was efficient, security was guaranteed, visitors had various conveniences at their disposal and that the attitude of law enforcement officers towards them was friendly.”²³² Which, conversely, according to some, was only possible due to the Russian State’s control over most areas of social life.

While the main argument of this essay, and of soft power research in general, is to highlight how transformative soft power is to the image of a country abroad, there is also a significant portion of public diplomacy which aims directly at the domestic public, with the objective of increasing trust in the country and its political leaders, besides creating new and better living conditions for the people in that country. According to Richard Arnold the investment in MSE brought about actual positive social policies, bettering systems of “health, community building, volunteering and entertainment.”²³³

²³⁰“More than half the world watched record-breaking 2018 World Cup” *FIFA Media Release* (see Chap. 4, no. 184)

²³¹Simon Calder, “Why the World Cup will open Russia up to tourism” *The Independent* - July 6, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/world-cup-2018-russia-travel-visa-kaliningrad-tourism-putin-holiday-explore-a8434271.html>

²³²Iwona Wiśniewska and Jadwiga Rogoża, “The 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia – circuses instead of bread?” *OSW Centre For Eastern Studies* - September 17, 2018. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-09-17/2018-fifa-world-cup-russia-circuses-instead-bread>

²³³ Richard Arnold, ed. *Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup*. 243.

In addition to that, this domestic aspect of soft power strategies could be seen during the World Cup in the articles and speeches put forward by Russian specialists. While Putin organized diplomatic dinners, and games were happening all around the country attracting fans from dozens of different countries, Russians were able to reassess their understanding of their own country, taking into consideration how peaceful and pluralistic the tournament was unfolding as. Some, like writer and political scientist Alexei Muhin, highlighted that the amount of foreign fans visiting the country would “do a major service to changing the world's perception of Russia, [...] Now, the Western media is going to find it very difficult to lie to its citizens because part of them, a very decent part, traveled to Russia and saw it all for themselves.”²³⁴ While others argued that the event was proof to Russians, that the world was, in fact, not against them, and that “nobody is besieging us. We can see it and know it. If you have your doubts, go along to Moscow's Nikolskaya Street, the most intense fan-zone of the championship. Go on, you won't regret it.”²³⁵

Finally, there were people, such as documentary filmmaker Yulia Melamed, who, in a column written for the *Gazeta.ru*. (considered to be a government-critical outlet), described the “experience of joy and unity, of feeling like a part of Europe is not just going to go away. It will stay and cause changes. Maybe even revolutionary changes. Revolutions don't happen on the streets, they happen inside your heads,” she continues, however, describing her fear that once the World Cup ended, this optimism that was built during the tournament might disappear, “Dear guests, don't leave, don't leave us alone over here, one on one with officials and security forces as they wake up,” she wrote.²³⁶

²³⁴Darko Janjevic, “Russian press on the World Cup: Joyful foreign fans praised from different political views”, *DW* - June 23, 2018. <https://www.dw.com/cda/en/russian-press-on-the-world-cup-joyful-foreign-fans-praised-from-different-political-views/a-44363271>

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

Like Sochi, and characteristic of Russian public diplomacy efforts, the hosting of the World Cup was an attempt to reconnect Russians to their own country, after decades of a growing detachment between civil society and the government. Even though, as can be seen with Melamed's column, there was still skepticism regarding how long that feeling of unity and decrease in isolationism would last, most Russians, on all sides of the political spectrum, as well as the general public which attended the World Cup felt that the tournament was a great success, showing Russia as it truly was, without compromising to *western values*, but without being shown as a backwards society either. Most importantly for Russians, the euphoria led many to believe that the tournament would help to bring about some societal and political changes, especially domestically. This next section will then analyze if these expectations became a reality.

5.2.3 Russia after the World Cup

There were two major areas which were expected to benefit from the success of the World Cup: Russian social life in general, and Vladimir Putin's administration specifically. This is the case because, as has been discussed, MSE are not simply a propaganda effort for political leaders to stand upon, the investment necessary for such a feat inevitably will impact the lives of the general public.

Socially, Putin's heavy investment in sport did bring about some important changes: increase in participation in sports; higher life expectancy; increase in community building efforts, such as female participation in volunteer working for the MSE; as well as the reducing of radical violence, or as Richard Arnold explained "one of the positive social externalities of Russian sport policy has been a decline in both skinhead and Islamic radical violence."²³⁷ Besides creating, as said before, a feeling that can be described as 'general optimism.'

²³⁷Richard Arnold, ed. *Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup*. 245.

Despite that, while the World Cup, like Sochi, was a sporting success, this did not directly translate into the bettering of the image of the Putin administration, or his own approval ratings in the country.

In fact, as the event was still unfolding, Putin was already dealing with a political crisis, caused by the announcement of a deeply unpopular decision to increase retirement age (in what seems like a full circle effect, given that the increase in life expectancy, largely caused by sports participation, led to the need to an increase in retirement age); the announcement was made on the same day of the opening ceremony of the World Cup, and some claimed that was a deliberate decision, given that, during the tournament, civil society groups could not petition for authorization of organized protests in the streets.²³⁸ Still, by the end of the World Cup, Putin's approval rating was at around 67%, one of the lowest ratings of his entire administration. While dealing with this unrest, Putin left unpopular figure, Medvedev, to watch the last games of the Russian national team at the World Cup; his constant participation until then, made his absence even more noticeable.

Even so, the results of these two MSE compelled Russia to continue its investment in such events, hosting the 2021 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup, as well as 7 games at the EURO2020, and bidding to host EURO2028 or 2032, – a request that was scrapped by FIFA as a result of the war against Ukraine.²³⁹ The UEFA Champions League final of that year, scheduled to be played at Gazprom Arena in May, was also moved to the Stade de France, in Paris.

Starting with the 2018 World Cup, however, there has been a growing separation between the actions carried by Vladimir Putin and what had been his sports plan since 2008.

²³⁸Oliver Carroll, "Controversial Russian pension reform passes first hurdle – despite historic fall in Putin's rating" *The Independent* - July 20, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/vladimir-putin-russian-pension-reform-duma-ratings-a8454661.html>

²³⁹Mark Ogden, "UEFA bans Russia's Euro bids for 2028, 2032" *ESPN* - May 2, 2022. https://www.espn.co.uk/football/story/_/id/37628093/uefa-bans-russia-euro-bids-uk-turkey-host-28

While investment in sports related policies and infrastructure remained, Putin began to look once again inward to his own domestic public, and pursue more of the hard power strategies related to *pan Russianism*, and Russian Nationalism, which resulted in his war against Ukraine and the isolation of Russia from the *Global North*. Conversely, however, Putin's ratings now rank at around 80%, an increase similar to that seen during the invasion of Crimea²⁴⁰, even if that was to the detriment of his reputation internationally.

5.3 FIFA and UEFA's Role in the Conflict

What has not been discussed so far, however, is the role performed by the international organizations which regulate world football (FIFA) and European football (UEFA) in such a politically charged region, where football has walked side-by-side with political grievances, nationalism, and aggression. This has not been an oversight on the part of the author of this thesis, but rather a testimony as to how hard it is to access the role played by those associations, because they declare themselves as completely separated from political affairs.

FIFA, as the primary regulatory organ and the only worldwide football organization, declares in its statute that "FIFA remains neutral in matters of politics and religion"²⁴¹ and claims that it has been consistently reinforcing this policy since its foundation in 1904. Vladimir Putin has personally thanked FIFA for that, on the day before the opening 2018 World Cup saying, "I wanted to underline FIFA's commitment to the principle of sports without politics"²⁴², in fact, Russia's public stance on football has consistently been of a separation between sports and politics, but their actions show otherwise.

²⁴⁰ "Do you approve of the activities of Vladimir Putin" *Statista*

²⁴¹"FIFA STATUTES" *FIFA*,

<https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/5eb2b45e547ff39f/original/ndfxogwkoukoe4dm3uk0-pdf.pdf>

²⁴²Maxim Rodionov, "Day before World Cup, Putin thanks FIFA for keeping politics out of sport" *Reuters* - June 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-soccer-worldcup-putin-fifa-idUSKBN1J90YF>

The idea of remaining as a non-political party which FIFA encourages to be followed by all associations of football is difficult to follow because, as shown before, the lack of consensus on where matters of politics end and where matters of football begin can create more impasses than resolutions. As it is in the case of Russia and Ukraine relations, where the lack of a clear consensus of the course of action to be taken by FIFA and UEFA, has caused a series of minor incidents, but that in the long run created a politically charged environment in the football scene of the region.

Firstly, while FIFA reinforces that in the international competitions under its tutelage (the World Cup and its qualifiers, and the now extinct Confederations Cup) all teams are obliged to play against each other, if they are so drawn, UEFA has a series of limitations on which teams can play each other in the first phases of competitions. One of those cases is that of Russia and Ukraine, which cannot be drawn in the same group in UEFA competitions, as a result of the 2014 invasion of Crimea.²⁴³ At the time, however, they did not take any further actions against Russian teams or athletes. In fact, even though UEFA failed to openly acknowledge at the time, it was clear that football pitches were an extension of the political tensions between both countries.

The case of Ukrainian player Yaroslav Rakitskiy shows how the career of a footballer in the region became politically charged. In 2019, having gathered some criticism for being seen as sympathetic towards Russia on previous occasions,²⁴⁴ Rakitskiy left Shakhtar to play for Zenit. This led to the player, who was previously called to the Ukrainian national team over 50 times, to not be called to the team again; causing his early retirement from international

²⁴³Dmitriy Rogovitskiy, "UEFA keeps Russian and Ukrainian clubs apart" *Reuters* - July 17, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-soccer-uefa-russia-ukraine-idUKKBN0FM1V520140717>

²⁴⁴Andrew Todos, "Playing for the enemy: The Ukrainian footballers who sign for Russian clubs", *Atlantic Council* - January 12, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/playing-for-the-enemy-the-ukrainian-footballers-who-sign-for-russian-clubs/>

football.²⁴⁵ At Zenit, Rakitskiy quickly became one of the team's most important players, and a favorite of the fans, but some of his comments speaking against the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, led him to be benched for a month, when he eventually ended his contract with the club, by mutual consent,²⁴⁶ and headed back to Shakhtar, where he currently plays. This example shows that while for players and clubs, it is impossible to detach their own selves from their political views, it becomes a Sisyphean task for football organizations to determine what is political, and therefore not allowed, and what is not.

While the relationship between the Russian and Ukrainian association mimicked that of the foreign policy of both countries, especially after 2014, that has not always been the case, and, in fact, in 2013 both football federations showed the intention of bringing the national leagues closer together, with talks of creating a stronger, united football league between the countries. To show their intent of a more connected football scene, they created the *United Tournament*, an exhibition club tournament, where teams from Ukraine (Shakhtar and Dynamo), and teams from Russia (Zenit and Spartak), played each other in stadiums hailing from both countries. With the tournament's success, a second edition happened in 2014. Even so, talks of a joint league, or recognition of the *United Tournament* eventually died out for lack of UEFA approval,²⁴⁷ and were eventually dropped completely once the annexation of Crimea began.

It is important to note that while the granting of the World Cup to Russia by FIFA, in 2010, came before the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, the process for the selection of the

²⁴⁵Ibid.

²⁴⁶Luke Brown, "Ukraine's Yaroslav Rakitskyi leaves Russian club Zenit Saint Petersburg by mutual consent", *The Athletic* - March 2, 2022. <https://theathletic.com/3510768/2022/03/02/ukraines-yaroslav-rakitskyi-leaves-russian-club-zenit-saint-petersburg-by-mutual-consent/>

²⁴⁷Anna Lidster, "Russia's grand football designs", *Aljazeera* - May 18, 2013. <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2013/5/18/russias-grand-football-designs>

host country happened just months after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.²⁴⁸ Moreover, during the organization process of the World Cup, there were numerous reports of inhumane working conditions for those deployed in the construction of World Cup apparatus,²⁴⁹ rise in racism²⁵⁰ and homophobia²⁵¹ inside stadiums, and investigations regarding the process of awarding Russia the hosting rights.²⁵² Still, in 2014, when asked by the Ukrainian federation to change the hosting nation, then-FIFA president Sepp Blatter simply said that "The World Cup has been given and voted to Russia and we are going forward with our work."²⁵³

Similar criticism has been made towards the awarding of Qatar to host the tournament in 2022, leaving some to point out the ‘*western bias*’ of how those tournaments were being portrayed. Nonetheless, while it is important to acknowledge possible bias, especially towards non-Westernized and conservative nations, when it comes to Russia, the concerns raised had basis in actuality: from Russia’s aggressive behavior towards its neighbors, to Gianni Infantino himself admitting to the mistreatment of migrant workers,²⁵⁴ anti-LGBTQ+ laws sanctioned in the country,²⁵⁵ as well as racist manifestos from Ultras, similar to the following made by Zenit fans, which reads “We’re not racists but we see the absence of black players at Zenit as an important tradition. We are against representatives of sexual minorities playing for Zenit. For us it is crucial (Zenit) has retained its own identity, and not turned into an average European

²⁴⁸Peter Dickinson, “The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin’s green light”, *The Atlantic Council* -August 7, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/>

²⁴⁹Dan Roan, “World Cup: Fifa urged to strengthen workers’ rights in Russia & Qatar” *BBC* - November 9, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/41929421>

²⁵⁰Matt Bonesteel, “Study finds pervasive racism in Russian soccer ahead of 2018 World Cup”, *The Washington Post* - February 27, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2015/02/27/study-finds-pervasive-racism-in-russian-soccer-ahead-of-2018-world-cup/>

²⁵¹Saba Aziz, “Russia, football World Cup and rising homophobia” *Al Jazeera* - June 18, 2018.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/6/18/russia-football-world-cup-and-rising-homophobia>

²⁵²Tariq Panja and Kevin Draper, “U.S. Says FIFA Officials”

²⁵³“Sepp Blatter: Russia will host 2018 World Cup despite Crimea” *BBC Sport* - March 21, 2014.

<https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/26691561>

²⁵⁴David Conn, “World Cup 2018: Fifa admits workers have suffered human rights abuses” *The Guardian* - May 25, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2017/may/25/fifa-world-cup-2018-workers-human-rights-abuses>

²⁵⁵Graeme Reid, “Russia, Homophobia and the Battle for ‘Traditional Values’” *Human Rights Watch* - May 17, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/17/russia-homophobia-and-battle-traditional-values>

team, with a standard set of foreign players. We only want players from other brotherly Slav nations.”²⁵⁶

In the end, as the war unfolded and football federations such as Poland, Sweden and the Czech Republic, alongside Ukraine, made clear that they would not play any matches against Russian opposition,²⁵⁷ as well as pressure from other business partners grew,²⁵⁸ it was clear to UEFA and FIFA that they would have to take into consideration what had always been clear to players, teams, national associations, and political leaders: that there is a political element in any intercontinental, multi state federation, including football, and that “despite well-articulated intention to remain beyond politics, international sport functionaries and mega event hosts regularly have to face political challenges and deal with political situations.”²⁵⁹

5.4 The Impact of the War on Russia’s Football Diplomacy

As shown throughout this thesis, football’s politically driven background has contributed to the worldwide phenomenon that it is today, and this has also historically been the situation in the ex-USSR states as well. In fact, this has proven to be a point of both contingency and failed attempts at rapprochement between Ukraine and Russia since at least the 1960s. After what Putin initiated what he called a “special military operation” in Ukraine, which translated into a full-scale war, the football scene in Russia suffered more than most areas of social life. This next section of the chapter will exemplify why that is the case, and what are the results of sanctions imposed upon associations, clubs, and players.

²⁵⁶“Fan group calls on Russian club Zenit not to sign black players” *CNN* - December 17, 2012. <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/17/sport/football/football-racism-zenit-russia/index.html>

²⁵⁷Ben Morse, “Poland, Sweden refuse to play Russia in World Cup qualification playoffs after invasion of Ukraine” *CNN* - February 26, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/26/football/poland-football-russia-ukraine-world-cup-spt-intl/index.html>

²⁵⁸Kaveh Solhekol, “Ukraine crisis: UEFA under pressure to cut ties with Gazprom as Manchester United reconsider Aeroflot deal” *Sky Sports* - February 25, 2022. <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/12040/12550914/ukraine-crisis-uefa-under-pressure-to-cut-ties-with-gazprom-as-manchester-united-consider-aeroflot-deal>

²⁵⁹Richard Arnold, ed. *Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup*. 91

It is important to underline that, according to the joint statement issued by FIFA and UEFA, Russian teams “shall be *suspended* from participation in both FIFA and UEFA competitions until further notice.”²⁶⁰ This does not mean that the Russian football association has been banned, as it happened in 1976 with Apartheid South Africa, and resulted in the country having to found a new football association in order to be reinstated into FIFA in the 1990s.

Moreover, this decision entails that Russia cannot play official FIFA or UEFA matches, but club friendlies are still allowed, which both the national men’s and women’s team have played, as well as the clubs, such as Zenit.²⁶¹ In addition to that, at the time of the release of the joint statement (28th of February), FIFA had already meddled with the idea of allowing the Russian team to play under a neutral banner, but abandoned the plan once it became clear that other national teams would refuse to play Russia under any circumstances. As for UEFA, on the 24th of February, the day of the beginning of the invasion, Zenit lost to Real Betis on an aggregate score of 3x2 in the Europa League knockout phase, marking the exit of the last Russian team still playing in any UEFA competition, which made the decision to ban them, less troublesome in light of the competitions that were still being played.

The real impact of the war on Russian football have mostly to do with sanctions which led to massive revenue losses in three main areas: the suspension from competitions and the cash prizes that come with participation; loss of overseas commercial deals, from sponsorship to rights of transmission of matches; and FIFA’s decision to allow players to suspend their contracts unilaterally or renegotiate them outside of the *transfer window*.²⁶²

²⁶⁰“FIFA/UEFA suspend Russian clubs” (see chap. 1, no 1)

²⁶¹Graham Dunbar, “Ukrainian soccer club calls out Turkish rival for going to Russia to play Gazprom-owned Zenit” *Associated Press* - July 10, 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/russia-dynamo-kyiv-fenerbahce-zenit-gazprom-af9e6a145a5b74e47df46d7ca6bee723>

²⁶²The transfer window is a period that happens twice a year, in which clubs are allowed to sell and buy football players. More information in: Dan Sheldon, “What is the transfer window? When does it end? How do transfers work?” *The Athletic* - January 9, 2023. <https://theathletic.com/3338294/2022/06/04/transfer-window-faq/>

The exodus of foreign players, most especially from western countries, also means that in the long run, most clubs will have to rebuild from a limited pool of players, and without guarantees of keeping them, or getting new players from abroad. An example of how that can have devastating results for a club can be seen in Rubin Kazan, which, before the war, was in 2nd in the Russian Premier League (in one of the spots that gives direct qualification to the Champions League), but being one of the squads with the most international players,—six of which unilaterally suspended their contracts—, Kazan was relegated by the end of the season.²⁶³

As of the European players that decided to stay in the Russian League, many have not been recalled, or have been outright suspended from their national teams, as was the case of Polish international Maciej Rybus,²⁶⁴ and Norwegian player Mathias Normann.²⁶⁵ In a controversial decision by the federations that is not endorsed by FIFA.

Even though the football scene has not, and probably will not, completely die in Russia, what will unfold is a steady decay in the quality of the league, individual teams, and the players themselves, for a lack of competition, revenue, and renovation. The same will also happen to the infrastructure surrounding football, starting with the enormous stadia built in less football-driven areas. In the end, even though some other sectors of Russian social and economic life might stay afloat, given their partnership with countries which do not condemn the war, or refuse to impose sanctions, football is not particularly competitive in these nations, as shown by the friendlies that the men's national team have played in the last year: against Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, who have never even qualified to a World Cup.

²⁶³Shina Oludare, “Russian Premier League Wrap: Gbamin & Konate score, Ejuke assists as Talbi’s Rubi Kazan relegated” *Goal* - May 21, 2022 <https://www.goal.com/en-gb/news/russian-premier-league-wrap-gbamin-and-konate-score-ejuke-assists-as-talbi-s-rubi-kazan-relegated/blt47a6ecdbd817a73f>

²⁶⁴“Poland’s Maciej Rybus to miss World Cup after Spartak Moscow move” *The Guardian* - June 20, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/jun/20/polands-maciej-rybus-to-miss-out-on-world-cup-after-spartak-moscow-move>

²⁶⁵Amitai Winehouse, “Mathias Normann dropped from Norway squad after signing with Russian club” *The Athletic* - September 6, 2022. <https://theathletic.com/3569299/2022/09/06/mathias-normann-norway-world-cup-russia/>

Conclusions:

This chapter had the objective of evaluating how has Russia politically used football in order to propel the Putin administration to a more internationally friendly status, as well as promoting a Russia that was not like the one portrayed in western media. This had effects both domestic and international effects: domestically, it created a feeling of optimism that Russia was finally coming out of a period of isolationism, without compromising their own values. Internationally, the organization of the event, which counted with more than 3 million people travelling to Russia, bridged the gap between what was the ‘perceived’ Russia, and what was the ‘actual’ Russia. Nonetheless, there needs to be an assessment, when any MSE happens, as to how much of what is shown in a specific period, is the reality of everyday life in a given place.

It is undeniable, however, that the World Cup did bring about important political victories for the Putin administration, even if boycotted by many Western political leaders. In fact, the good conduct of the tournament, allied with the international fans’ appreciation of the overall infrastructure in the country, led to a feeling that the boycott was another instance of “Western media stereotypes depicting the country as hopelessly corrupt”, and that, in fact,²⁶⁶ “the Kremlin has not exploited the World Cup for propaganda purposes any more than previous hosts have done. Whether it was Germany, South Africa, or Brazil, all have used the occasion to burnish their reputations for hospitality and openness.”²⁶⁷

Moreover, while the bidding process, and the regime of *quid-pro-quo* between the Russian government, and its oligarchs as to how the infrastructure for the tournament would be built, initially resulted in a rise on Putin’s domestic popularity, the World Cup was not sufficient to pacify the population during the social crisis that happened during the

²⁶⁶Konstantin Sonin, “Russia’s World Cup Opportunity” *Project Syndicate* - April 25, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-2018-world-cup-by-konstantin-sonin-2018-04?barrier=accesspaylog>

²⁶⁷Ibid.

tournament, and that continued to have repercussions after. This, associated with an increase on Putin's interest on Russian Nationalism, led to a further separation between sports diplomacy and his other political endeavors.

Nonetheless, previous political and diplomatic incidents regarding football the region, made the sporting scene politically charged to the point that relations between Ukrainian and Russian teams, and players, mimicked that of their States, moreover, in an attempt to remain non-political, the football organizations acting in the region, namely FIFA and UEFA, were unable to act more efficiently, and in fact, had difficulties in swiftly act when Russia displayed aggressive behavior towards its neighbors in the past decade.

For that reason, it is impossible to disassociate football from politics in Russia, as it has been both structured and used politically since the Soviet years, but especially throughout the Putin administration.

6. Conclusion: The End of Russian Soft Power?

In 2013, Joseph Nye put forward the idea that Russia had not yet fully grasped what soft power was, and how to yield it. The problem, he explained, is that Russia, alongside China, had concentrated all of their soft power efforts in the form of governmental actions, while in the United States, or the European Union, for example, soft power mostly emanated out of civil society, individuals, and the private sector.²⁶⁸ While utilizing the government as the main instrument of soft power can be useful for creating a single and organized strategy of public diplomacy, this becomes a problem when this strategy, which is intrinsically attached to the actions of the administration of the State, is trampled by hard power antics, such as the acts of aggressions against neighboring countries perpetuated by Russia since the beginning of the Putin administration.

In fact, according to Kornely Kakachia, a professor at Tbilisi State University and director of the Tbilisi-based Georgian Institute of Politics, the actions of the last decade show that “Russia has lost its soft power. They don’t know how to use it any more with their neighbours. They just use this brutal force.”²⁶⁹ This idea has been voiced mostly by civil society organizations in the ex-Soviet States, in what was once a region permeated with Russian public diplomacy, from common language, culture, and shared history, but that has now been tarnished by Russia’s continuous use of hard power.

Moreover, the war against Ukraine has uplifted a new country in the soft power arena: Ukraine itself. Indeed, since 2022, no other country has advanced more in the soft power index than Ukraine’s 14 positions from 2022 to 2023, which now puts the country in the top 20 most influential nations metric for the first time in the history of the index.²⁷⁰ In the same analysis,

²⁶⁸Nye, “What China and Russia”, (see chapter 1, n. 25)

²⁶⁹Andrew Roth, “‘Russia has lost its soft power’: how war in Ukraine destabilises old Soviet allies”, *The Guardian* - March 11, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/11/russia-has-lost-its-soft-power-how-war-in-ukraine-destabilises-old-soviet-allies>

²⁷⁰“Global Soft Power Index 2023”, *Brand Finance* (see chap. 1, n. 12)

Russia's reputation metric has dropped 82 positions in one year, ranking at 102nd out of 121 nations.²⁷¹

Nonetheless, according to many, including Nye, it is imprudent to consider that the war has indefinitely destroyed Russian soft power, especially in regions not geographically proximate to Russia. As Nye pointed out, in fact, almost a third of the world has either voted against or refrained from condemning Russia on at least one UN resolution regarding the war. Moreover, none of the countries from the *Global South* have imposed sanctions against Russia, and the *BRICS* are enjoying a favorable political moment not seen since its foundation, with 22 countries having formally applied to join the bloc and a further 20 having shown informal interest in doing so.

As Nye has explained, and has been accepted by others such as Jennifer Kavanagh, this war has just highlighted the nature of power in the world post globalization: it is a mixture of hard and soft power, which happen in a constant flow, and the actions of one State may cause ripples across the globe, advancing or diminishing the status of other nations, through their interdependence, shared values, or economic interests.²⁷² What is important to understand, however, is that as a strategy that depends heavily on the perception of others, soft power tends to be the first to shrink when a country deploys hard power, such as Russia, but also the first to increase in the country that suffers the aggression, as it is the case with Ukraine.

Moreover, it cannot be overstated how soft power and public diplomacy are only part of a greater set of strategies deployed by the Putin administration. Soft power can, and will, if deployed wisely, help in improving the image of a certain actor, in this case, Putin and his administration. Nonetheless, in the specific case of Russia, polls regarding Putin's overall popularity show a spike in domestic approval rates when there is deployment of hard power.

²⁷¹Ibid.

²⁷²Jennifer Kavanagh, "The Ukraine War Shows How the Nature of Power Is Changing", *Carnegie* - June 16, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/06/16/ukraine-war-shows-how-nature-of-power-is-changing-pub-87339>

When it comes to football diplomacy, however, this thesis has tried to show how impacted the entirety of Russia's football scene has been since the beginning of the war. The economic connections built over the last three decades have almost entirely collapsed, leaving Russian oligarchs and companies limited to invest in their own country, or in the few countries which continuously show support towards Russia, most of which do not have a football scene as developed as the previous western-European partners; what is more, most of the spaces which were before occupied by Russia, have now been taken by others, most prominently from companies and investment funds from the Gulf States, China and the US.

Russia also became a *pariah* in all types of football competitions, even after the IOC itself called for the reinstatement of Russian athletes under neutral banners.²⁷³ Besides missing the 2022 Qatar World Cup, only one cycle after having hosted the event, Russia is also in severe danger of not participating in the 2026 US-Canada-Mexico World Cup, even though President of the Russian Football Union Alexander Dyukov said in December 2022 that "It is important for us to qualify for the 2026 FIFA World Cup and get through. I've set myself such a task."²⁷⁴ To participate in a World Cup organized in the US, brings back Cold War sports rivalry, and would be important for Russia's international image. Nonetheless, talks to both UEFA, for a readmission, and the AFA, for a possible switch in organizations, seem to have reached a roadblock in the last few months. The threat of Russia missing another World Cup becomes more apparent as the qualifying rounds for the 2026 tournament will start in October 2023.

While in general the lack of willingness from UEFA and FIFA to meddle in what they saw as political issues has led to Russia to feel emboldened in their hard power strategies, even if that meant sacrificing some of their football soft power, it seems that the actions taken now

²⁷³Aadi Nair, "Russian athletes say IOC participation plan 'excessive and discriminatory'" *Reuters* - April 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/sports/russian-athletes-say-ioc-participation-plan-excessive-discriminatory-2023-04-30/>

²⁷⁴"RFU's goal: national team's participation in 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers" *TASS Russian News Agency* - December 30, 2022. <https://tass.com/sports/1558015>

by these associations will have lasting effects on Russia's football landscape, from grassroots levels, to their capacity of pursuing players in foreign markets, to their reinstatement in international competitions. Meaning that while Russian soft power, as a whole, can recuperate in the long run, as suggested by Nye, their football soft power will have a more arduous path to regain even a part of their previous international standing.

What is more, in an interesting parallel between modern Russia and the Soviet Union, a comparison that has permeated this thesis, it is important to highlight how often MSE have been used as a predecessor for hard-power driven military invasions by Russia, especially the Olympic Games, which, while not the main focus of this thesis, had their impact flashed-out, when possible. As was discussed before, this was the case with the Olympic Games in Beijing 2008 (even if hosted by an ally of Russia, rather than Russia itself) and the invasion of Georgia, Sochi 2014 and the annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 War in Ukraine, which started on February 24th, 2022, just four days after the closing ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Similarly, while the 1980 Moscow Games are considered one of the best in modern Olympic history, they happened during the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, in what many consider to be the beginning of the end of the Soviet Bloc.²⁷⁵ It remains to be seen if the War in Ukraine will have the same devastating impact in Russia.

The reason why this topic was chosen, and the research that was conducted in this thesis was to highlight how football, and all its related areas, have the potential of being a useful tool for foreign strategy making. Nonetheless, they can also be a fertile ground for corruption, populism, enhancement of historical rivalries, and exacerbated nationalism.

More than that, the example of Russia show that sports cannot be the only driving force behind a country's public diplomacy strategy, as they will be one of the first affected in the

²⁷⁵More information in: Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, "The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union" *British International Studies Association* (1999) 93–708.
<https://faculty.washington.edu/aseem/afganwar.pdf>

case this strategy fails, yet to ignore their impact on a State both domestically and internationally altogether, as has happened with the majority of research regarding public diplomacy, especially Russian, gives an incomplete picture of what has been a major priority of the Putin administration since at least the 2000s.

This research was set out with the objective of evaluating why and how Russia has used football as a tool for its soft power strategies, and I have concluded that football played role in Russian soft power for four main reasons: its historic popularity in Russia and the world at large, the economic opportunities it provided after the *berlusconization* process that happened in the 1990s, the politically charged environment which is characteristic of the sport, and the visibility that holding a World Cup brings to a country.

Furthermore, the infrastructure built by Russia for these public diplomacy strategies to be carried out were divided into two main components: economic relationships, such as sponsorship and ownership deals, which inserted Russian companies and oligarchs into the realm of world football, as a means to get foreign publics familiarized the brands and their products, as well as creating a closer connection between club owners and the fans. Those deals were important for their economic gains, but they also helped in diplomatic negotiations, as was the case with Nord Stream 2 and South Stream 1.

The second component, and broader in its definition, was the political relationship between football and the Putin administration, which culminated in the 2018 World Cup. This relationship brought new social policies in Russia, which improved living standards, besides at times improving Putin's image, both domestically and abroad. The 2018 World Cup was also the third in a series of four successful tournaments held in developing countries, which shows the capacity of these countries to host MSE.

These relationships, however, rested on the image that Russia was trying to build of a 'new' country, one that valued co-option rather than coercion, and the war of aggression against Ukraine shattered, for the time being, those connections, maybe indefinitely.

Other countries, however, have picked on the path opened by Russia, and if the success of the 2022 Qatar World Cup, the most profitable in World Cup history, is to show anything, is that we are not far from seeing other countries building upon the soft power strategies left behind by Russia in its pursuit of hard power. If Russia cannot continue its own legacy, other countries will.

As explained throughout this thesis, the work done to incorporate sports studies into the realm of political science and international relations is still scarce, and further research in this area could benefit from looking at the new power players in the football arena, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while also delving into the renewed interest from the United States in the sport. Moreover, more research should be done in order to fully grasp the interconnectivity between business endeavors, and soft power, given that much of Nye's work classifies economics as a component of hard power, when in fact, as shown by this thesis, soft power cannot exist by itself, and the financing of soft power should also be analyzed. Finally, most of the research regarding Russia and the Olympic games, has been restricted to the Soviet years, yet their modern use of the tournament as a back-drop for hard power investitures should also be more closely studied.

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