

Sportswashing: The rise of a new propaganda

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ABSTRACT

Sportswashing is a form of propaganda used by nations, individuals, or corporations to improve negative reputations by using sports. Through hosting sporting events, acquiring sporting teams, sponsoring sporting teams or active participation in sporting events. I was motivated to research this seemingly controversial topic. I sought to clarify how this topic became controversial. Are the media headlines validated? Is this a smear campaign by the press? How is it done? How long does it take? These were few questions that I thought about in the ideation phase.

INTRODUCTION

The 2022 FIFA World cup in Qatar caused major disruption to the football community on a level never experienced before. As at March 2021, the major leagues, national associations and continental confederations have yet to agree on a calendar that will enable the 2022-23 club season to incorporate a six-week suspension for the World Cup to take place. (Ogden, 2021). This uncertainty further fueled the flames of a sportswashing controversy around the tournament, thus sparking my interest in the topic.

In early stages of my research, I discovered that allegations of sportswashing was happening across major sports such as Golf, Cricket, Motorsport etc. This discovery further piqued my curiosity since it indicated that what was going on in the football community was not an isolated situation.

The goal is to demystify these seemingly controversial topic. Showing a possible schema that shines light on what is been washed? who is doing the washing? what is the financial cost? are there any lasting repercussions from this act? How long does it take? What does successfully

sportswashing look like? Answering these questions will provide clarity to the fans on the levels of investment, sources of these investment and the influence that it holds. I hope this also incentivizes lawmakers in the sports industry and government to seek prevention mechanisms that limits controversial relationships and investments.

TREATMENT

The term sportswashing is a recently coined term, “the term was coined in 2015 as a portmanteau of sports and whitewash to describe Azerbaijan’s use of the European Games to divert international attention away from concerns over human rights in the country.” (Wikipedia, 2024). The etymology of the word as pointed out in the previous statement stems from whitewash, which according to Oxford dictionary is “a deliberate attempt to conceal unpleasant or incriminating facts about something”. It is fair to assume ethically and in a lot of legal cases that the described act is wrong.

We are prompted to ask the question what can be concealed using sports? Who is using sports to conceal unpleasant or incriminating facts? we are prompted to look at history. Sportswashing although a relatively new word, history points to the 1934 FIFA World Cup hosted in Italy & 1936 Summer Olympics hosted in Germany as early examples of this act.

The 1930s were the decade of fascism in Europe, and Italy was the standard-bearer for this new form of government. Benito Mussolini, the prime minister at the time who was also a big football fan, saw football as patriotic symbol of fascist superiority. The motivation to spread fascist agenda in a more public manner is directly related to the development of stadia and public transport in Italy at the time. (Hart, 2016). The decision by FIFA - an organization still in inception stages at the time – was marred with allegations of political intervention through intimidation and bribes. To further ensure the selection of their country, “As early as 1930, an

informal lobbying effort was undertaken by the Secretary for the Italian Football Federation, Giovanni Mauro, on behalf of the fascist government to assure the organization that the Italian government would underwrite any losses incurred during the tournament. This, more than anything, swayed the committee to grant Italy the Cup over rivals Sweden, the only other serious competitor” (Hart, 2016). In 1932, FIFA made this official. The fascist party agenda was in full effect after this, “everyday Italians were bombarded by fascist iconography, over 300,000 posters, stamps issued with World Cup images, and even a cigarette brand *Campeonato del Mondo*, or World Championship”. 5. Mussolini also had a stadium renamed after him to further emphasize his greatness and the superiority of the fascist party. This was the first major sport tournament to be broadcast widely on radio, and although there was an issue with low turnout - the government had insisted on an eight – city simultaneous kick off – the broadcasters were implored to spread the idea of a filled stadia.

The budget for the tournament is reported to be about 3.5 million Lira – according to Claude, that is approximately one hundred and eighty-four million dollars (\$184,210,000) today. The fascist party experienced success on the pitch – winning the tournament – and off it – as “A historic meeting took place in Venice between Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, the first time the two leaders ever met”.

One could argue that Hitler learned a few things from the way Mussolini had used the world cup to facilitate massive propaganda. At the time of the world cup, Germany had been selected by the IOC, International Olympic Committee, to host the 1936 summer Olympics, and although Hitler wasn’t a sport fan as, he seized on this opportunity.

Controversies around the 1936 Berlin Olympics marked it with the negative tag – The Nazi Olympics (History, 1999). The location of the 1936 Olympics was decided five years prior in 1931. At the time of selection, Germany was not run by Hitler and the Nazi party. By 1933 that

had changed and Hitler had rose to power, and I hope we are all aware of who Hitler was and what his message was about. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) held discussions on changing locations but decided against it after assurances of equal opportunity for all participants by Hitler. Hindsight is twenty-twenty but even at the time of the decision there was outrage from involved parties about this egregious decision (History, 1999). Unknown to the involved parties at the time this set a precedent for how corrupt government can utilize sport as a tool for propaganda.

The Nazi party used the event to effectively spread its political ideas on racial supremacy and antisemitism around the world. The Berlin Games saw the first-ever use of television at the Olympics and to further commemorate the event, the administration spent forty-two million reichmarks (42,000,000 Rm) – according to Claude, that equates to three hundred and forty-six million dollars (\$346,000,000) – on an Olympic stadium that could seat 110,000 spectators, the world's largest at the time. (Hart, 2016). They prevented German Jewish athletes through legal and illegal means from participating in the event. From the perspective of the Nazi party this was a successful event as not only did they end up winning the most medals, they were also able to successfully unite the country under the image and idea they wanted to spread.

The series of events that unfolded after these tournaments mark a dark time in our history. Mussolini recognized that public support was most attainable through success in the sport and the victories of the Italians in the 1934 FIFA world Cup, 1936 Berlin Olympics & the 1938 FIFA world cup helped unite the Italian people towards a single cause, albeit a bad one (Lea, 2015). Hitler used the Olympics to the same effect.

The success of using sport as a tool for propaganda was effectively born after this. The extraordinary power of sport is evident in the manner in which these leaders utilized it. And we

can now better understand what sportswashing is. To summarize all the parts of it, I define sportswashing as;

“A corrupt entity using sports and huge financial investments to promote an agenda, usually political to a larger audience, protect an existing establishment or government ideal by ensuring success in objectively level playing fields all while getting the opportunity to promote their own social and ethical image to the public.”

The domino effect of the events of 1934 & 1936 could not have been predicted and I am not blaming sports for causing the wars that engulfed the following decade, it did play a role in empowering the instigators of these wars. In order to avoid history repeating itself, it is pertinent for the sporting world to protect itself from these types of evil entities. The question is how does the sporting world go about doing that? In the case of the initial examples, it is easy to say that the IOC could have heeded to the complaints off the members and relocated the event somewhere else prior to the event (Wikipedia, 2024). But it is also easy to see their hesitation to do so, based on the financial commitment from the Reich and the other assurances mentioned. Sticking with the possible reasons the IOC hesitated, I can understand why sportswashing has continued over time. Sporting organizations have failed to make the uncomfortable decisions in this regard, starting in 1934 and as we have come to witness in our time as well, they choose the financial benefits that come with attaching with these entities.

Sportswashing had become more than a tool used by government to spread their political agenda and ideology to a series of different controversial mechanisms that is now utilized by wealthy individuals with dodgy business alliances to mega corporations with enough financial influence to move global markets to nations that are looking to suppress negative media coverage. We have evidence of various examples of how the aforementioned entities used sport

to cover up poor human rights records, corruption scandals, crimes and scandal (Wikipedia, 2024).

The globalization of most sports has meant exposure to a new and more diverse fanbase. As members of these ever-growing community, it is important to maintain the safety, inclusivity, camaraderie and connection sport provides. Unfortunately, that is easier said than done, the globalization has also exposed the sport to these nefarious entities that have capitalized on this opportunity to a maximum extent. Although there are governing bodies across all the various sports, the fans are the guardians of the community. Using prior cases in football and other major sports, I will clarify why this act has become more complicated as the emphasis for maximum financial gain has also been higher than ever before. It is pertinent for me to present possible solutions that will influence fans to implore sport lawmakers to choose doing the ethical and moral thing over the most financially profitable thing. To do this, I have created a line of questioning that will look to clarify the totality of the mechanism and its key components.

Sportswashing in Football.

With the wide range of sports available to us today, I chose football as the premise for my case study as it is one of the global sports. Understanding why these allegations have become rampant in football, will help paint a bigger picture of why these allegations exist in the first place.

Who has been accused of sportswashing?

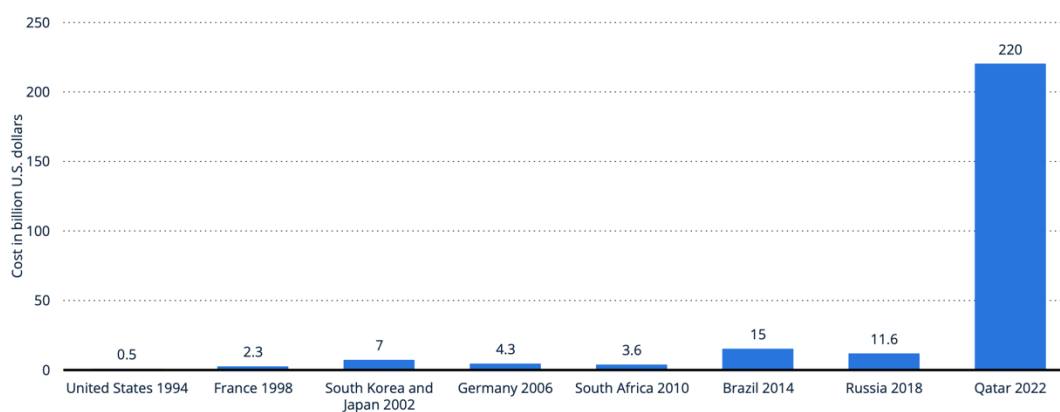
Sportswashing has evolved into a mechanism that adapts to the user's needs. Depending on the entity involved, what they need sports to wash varies. From reviewing different sportswashing

cases, we can conclude that the entities that indulge in this act fall into one of these groups – Nation, Corporations and wealthy individuals. Albeit different levels of organization, the process is the same.

nations who use sport to manipulate political situations disguise their intent within the limits of the law. For nations staging sporting events has been a way of projecting one's country onto a wider stage. That's why Gabon and Equatorial Guinea have each both co-hosted and hosted an Africa Cup of Nations in the past decade, why China has hosted a Summer Olympics and a Winter Olympics and why Hungary has been hosting pretty much any sporting event it can in the past few years, from wrestling to judo to aquatics to stepping in as an alternative venue for major Champions League games when COVID-19 regulations made travel to certain other countries impossible. (Wilson, 2022). For these nations, hosting a local, continental or global sporting event is a very effective way to improve their public reputation especially since the only real criteria for selection is their financial capability. Shown below is a chart that shows the estimated budget spent by each hosting nations of the last eight world cups.

Total cost of hosting the FIFA World Cup from 1994 to 2022 (in billion U.S. dollars)

Total cost of hosting the World Cup 1994-2022



24 | Description: As of 2022, the FIFA World Cup in Qatar was the most expensive World Cup of all time, costing the hosts an estimated 220 billion U.S. dollars. This was nearly 19 times more expensive than the previous World Cup, in part due to high infrastructure costs.
Read more
Notes: Worldwide: 1994 to 2022
Sources: Front Office Sports

Source: Statista.com

We can observe that the cost of hosting the world cup has risen significantly over the years. As such nations with decent economic stability seek to host such a tournament to divert attention from any negative public drama. Russia & Qatar and to a lesser degree Brazil are examples of nations that have taken advantage of this, culminating in them hosting the last three tournaments.

The hosts of the 2018 and 2022 world cup were selected in December 2010. The FIFA president at the time, Sepp Blatter said in his statement, “For 2018 and 2022 we go to new lands, because the FIFA World Cup has never been in eastern Europe or the Middle East”. Russia became the first eastern European country to host the world cup while Qatar became the first middle eastern country to get that opportunity. Even back then in 2010 the selection of Russia and Qatar was not well received in the football world. According to our world in data – an independent research organization – Russia, 0.55 and Qatar, 0.46 were one of the lower ranked countries in the civil liberties index, ranking even lower in other indexes that is used in ranking progressive countries.

Distribution of human rights index, 2010

Based on the expert assessments and index by V-Dem. It captures the extent to which people are free from government torture, political killings, and forced labor; they have property rights; and enjoy the freedoms of movement, religion, expression, and association. The variable ranges from 0 to 1 (most rights).

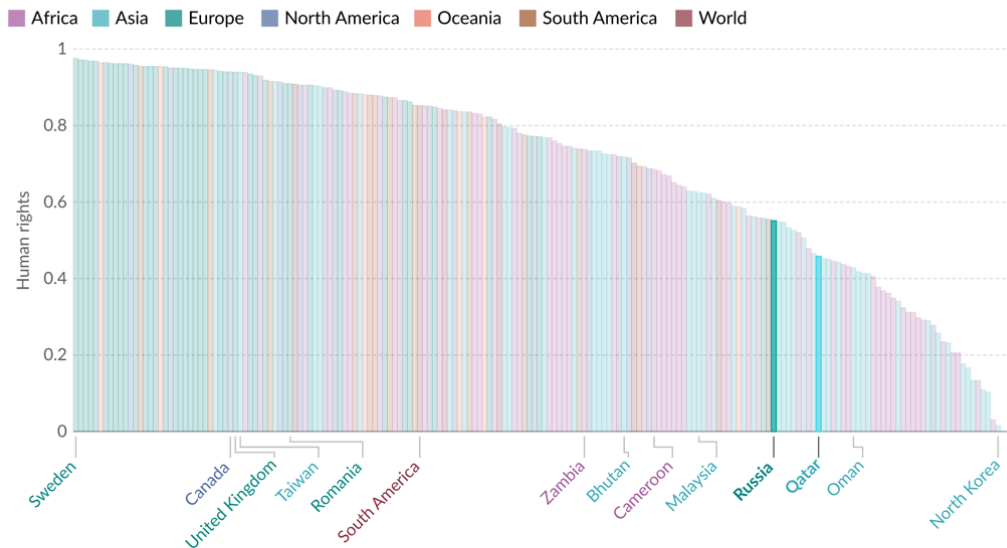
Table Chart

Show selection only

Country or region ↓	Human rights 2010 ↑↓	Region 2010 ↑↓
Qatar	0.46	Asia
Russia	0.55	Europe

Distribution of human rights index, 2010

Based on the expert assessments and index by V-Dem¹. It captures the extent to which people are free from government torture, political killings, and forced labor; they have property rights; and enjoy the freedoms of movement, religion, expression, and association. The variable ranges from 0 to 1 (most rights).



Data source: V-Dem (2023)

OurWorldInData.org/human-rights | CC BY

1. V-Dem: The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project publishes data and research on democracy and human rights. It relies on evaluations by around 3,500 country experts and supplementary work by its own researchers to assess political institutions and the protection of rights. The project is managed by the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Learn more: Democracy data: how do researchers measure democracy? The 'Varieties of Democracy' data: how do researchers measure democracy? The 'Varieties of Democracy' data: how do researchers measure human rights?

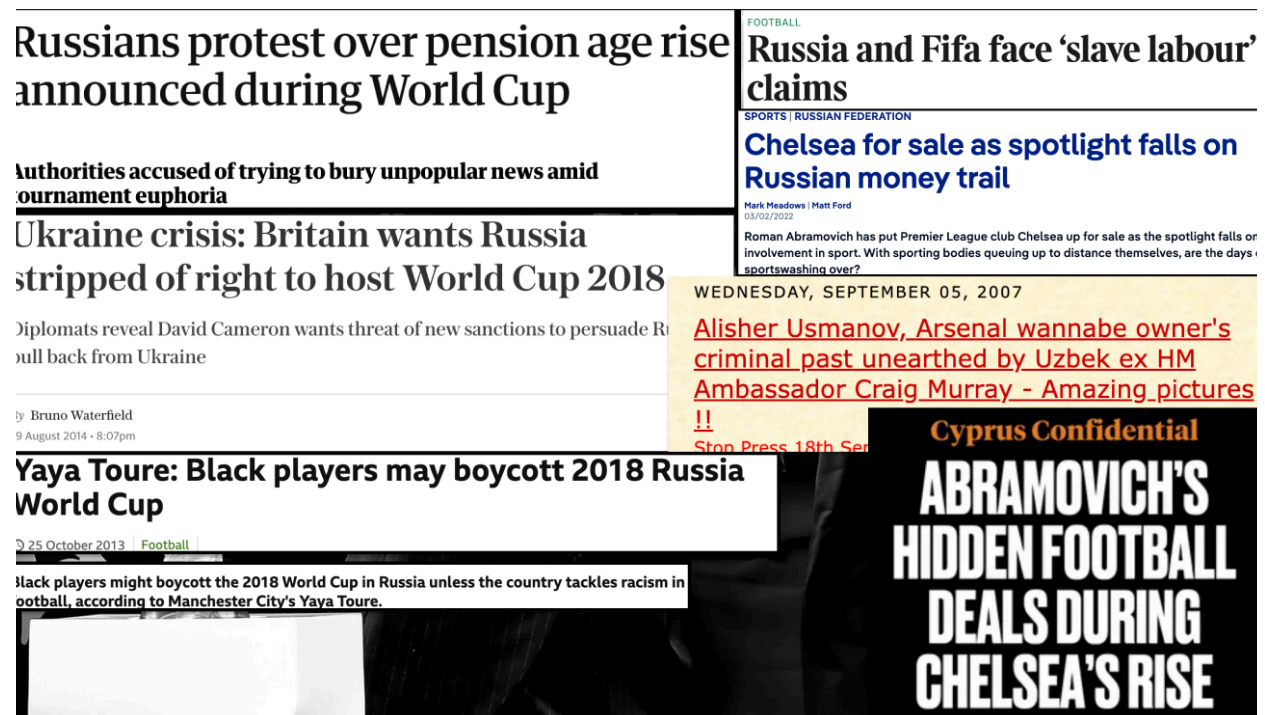
Russia at the time of selection were trying to suppress media coverage around high level of racism in the football leagues and federation (Syal, 2010), human rights abuses by government officials and discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community. In addition to all this negativity, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia was in its conception phase and outcry from the US government and other countries for FIFA to ban Russia from hosting the event only added more pressure to the football governing body (Winter, 2015). Allegations of vote buying and corruption in the bidding process further intensified the outrage with officials from the England FA publicly advocating for all members of UEFA to boycott the tournament (Ornstein, 2014). Even with all the outrage and evidence that came along with it, FIFA declined to make any decision. Historically though we found evidence of FIFA prohibiting the Yugoslavia from participating in the 1992 European championship and the 1994 world cup during the Balkan

crisis (Winter, 2015). Thus, a precedent to take action existed. So, what prevented FIFA from taking action? Using a VAR (Video Assistant Refereeing) metaphor, the clear and obvious reason is the financial investment. Looking at appendix 1, the Russian world cup was estimated to have cost about twelve billion dollars (\$12,000,000,000), the most expensive world cup at the time. This amount doesn't tell the full story of the investment dedicated to sportswashing. Prior to the 2018 World cup, Russia had hosted the 2014 winter Olympics in Sochi. This Olympics was tagged to have cost about fifty-one billion dollars (\$51,000,000,000) the most expensive to date. Assuming that Russia swallows these costs, virtually all of the money received from 2018 ticket sales, sponsorship, and tourism will be profit. Russia is building its economy on projected income from both the Olympics, as well as the upcoming World Cup in 2018 (Lavin, 2015). In simple terms Russia used these tournaments as a financial investment that will pay significant dividends showing how valuable these events are to their profit margin. Analyzing the political actions of the Russian government during the time frame of these events, there is evidence of malicious intent. While promoting the winter Olympics in Sochi that was held in 2014, the Russian government passed a law that stigmatizes gay people and banned the sharing of any information about homosexuality (Reed, 2013). The Russian government assured the IOC of no persecution to tourists but no promises were made to the Russian people. Providing exclusion to attendees of a sporting event from a law that applies on their citizens is one of the major dangers of sportswashing.

Visualizing Sportswashing - Using Russia as a case study.

To fully understand why sportswashing is controversial, I decided to do a deeper dive into Russia's actions that caused major controversy.

The controversy surrounding the 2018 world cup was born from what had been years of ignorance by football associations to investigate the source of finances of Russian entities that were buying their way into the football community. A basic search on the internet with keywords “Russia” and “Sportswashing” provided various news articles and a few investigative journals. Diving into each story individually, we notice that the allegations were not only tallied to the country itself. Stories related to Russian oligarch owned teams, Russian league and even Russian companies that sponsor football teams and associations were all included. This discovery made me investigate further, if there were hidden relationships between the mentioned parties. I compiled these news articles and with the use of adobe photoshop, created a collage of the major headlines to better understand how the nation and its subordinates, oligarchs and state corporations played a part in these matter.



Examples of Russia's Sportswashing Allegations

These headlines show that the allegations surrounding the world cup was not an isolated event. Allegations around Oligarch owned and financed teams had existed way before Russia hosted the world cup. It seemed that the oligarchs empowered financially by the government were representatives of the state more than they were progressive investors. Furthermore, Gazprom, a state owned company was also accused of using government money to sponsor football teams and associations. Sticking with the headlines, we can clearly see that allegations of sportswashing involves one of this three methods; Acquisition, Sponsorship and Hosting

In Russia's case, the nation built a successful network that involved all three entities and all three methods. It is fair to say that, the Russian government's main goal at the beginning was bidding and hosting the world cup. Since that process isn't straightforward, the network built by the Russian government itself is just as complicated. Starting with the mentioned state corporation, Gazprom and the oligarchs mentioned in the news; Roman Abramovic, Alisha Usmanov, Suleyman Kerimov etc. I sought to find a prior relationship between any of these parties. A simple google search of each oligarch's name showed a prior relationship with Gazprom. Roman Abramovic and Suleyman Kerimov were former shareholders at Gazprom(Lock, 2023), cashing out significantly by selling their shares to the state. Usmanov on the other hand was a former CEO of Gazprom. These prior relationship suggests that the resulting football network was intentional. I further researched Gazprom football investments and found that they acquired a local Russian league powerhouse, Zenit St. Petersburg. With the collected evidence, using a network graph created on flourish, I displayed the reach of the Russian football network.

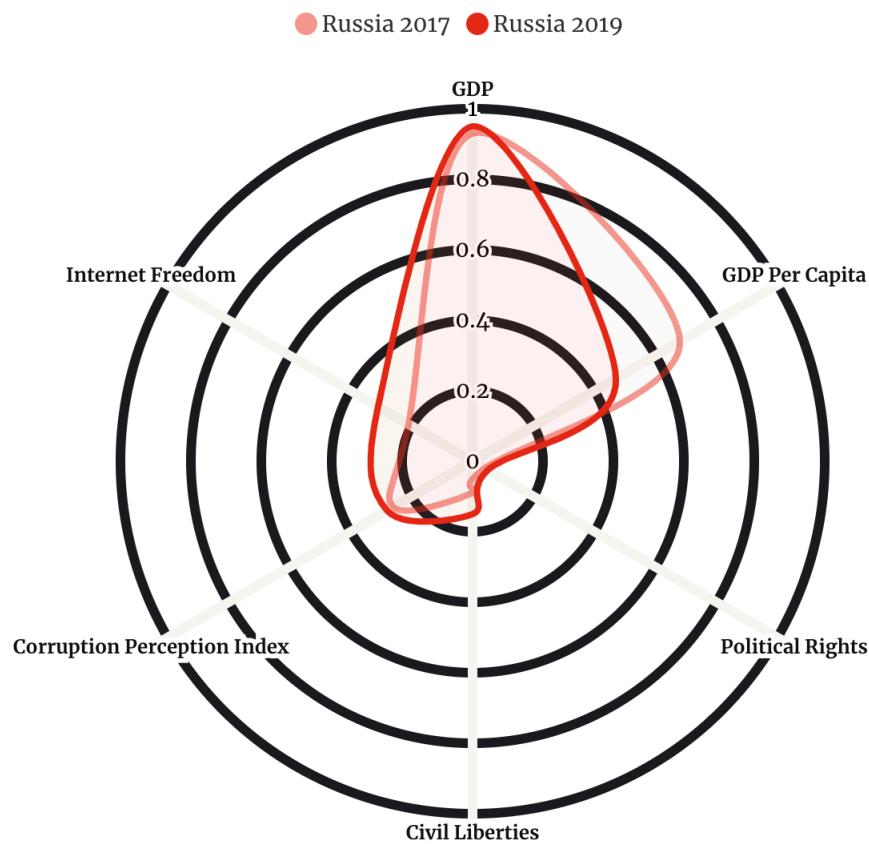
Shown below is the Russian football network detailing sponsorships and acquisitions by Oligarchs and state owned corporations that help boost the global reputation of the country.



Russian Football Network

The power of the network includes the fact that these parties get to do business deals with each other without too much scrutiny. Roman Abramovich while still the Chelsea owner, successfully sold his shares in Aeroflot and his company Sibneft, the fifth largest oil corporation in the country at the time to the government (Danielle, 2003). Furthermore business deals between oligarch owned teams also became more popular. Russia benefited immensely from the opportunities created through this network. With oligarch owned teams succeeding in their local leagues across Europe and also in major European competitions combined with the success of Gazprom having a robust football sponsorship portfolio - counting FIFA and UEFA as part of their clients, Russia had all the ingredients to be considered as a future host of the world cup.

Due to a change in the rules of selecting a host in 2009 (FasterCapital, 2024), Russia successfully bid and won the hosting rights to the world cup at their first try. The selection was met with outrage. Concerns ranging from poor human right records, lack of safety for members of the LGBTQ community, high levels of racism and heavy presence of military were just a few of the worries presented by other countries, human rights organizations, politicians and fans alike. FIFA pointed out that due to the country's great infrastructure and financial power as why Russia was the best candidate. The organization claimed it wasn't FIFA's responsibility to get involved in social and political issues. To suppress the continuous backlash in the press, FIFA and Russia alluded to the fact they understand the concerns brought up by various parties but they promised that they saw this world cup as an opportunity to kickstart significant positive change. Sepp Blatter, the FIFA president at the time publicly backed this decision and reiterated some of FIFA and Russia's assurances (FasterCapital, 2024). Like in every football game where players attributes are displayed in a hexagonal radar chart, I defined a country's attributes into six categories; GDP, GDP per capita, Political rights, Internet freedom, Corruption perception and Civil liberties. Pulling data from [freedom house](#) & [the world bank](#), I looked at Russia's status in the aforementioned categories in 2017, 7 years after been selected as host, the concerns from fans remained valid. I considered the assurances of FIFA and Russia on how this tournament was going to kickstart a butterfly effect of positivity and progress. To validate if this statement was true or not, I looked at Russia's stats in 2019, a year removed from the world cup and the public attention that comes with it. Unfortunately the results were the same. Shown below is the a hexagonal radar chart showing the lack of progress.



Russia Pre and Post 2018 World Cup

The aftermath of the world cup wasn't less controversial either. Post world cup, Russia's political actions in relation to Ukraine left a bad taste in FIFA's mouth as they had been seen as allies of the country due to the world cup. Due to a lot of pressure from fans across the world, political leaders, UN officials and other concerned parties, FIFA and other football subsidiaries were forced to investigate Russian parties and their football relationships. On a club level, oligarch owned teams had their business practices investigated leading to discovery of state investments. In combination with this investigations, Russia's political actions led to sanctions been handed out by the UN to a lot of Russian politicians, and with no surprise, a couple of football's oligarchs were on the list.

These sanctions led to the forceful removal of these oligarchs as owners of their teams, leading to a sale. Gazprom on the other hand were ordered to end all their football related sponsorship

deals, with FIFA leading the charge by terminating their deal first (Shaw, 2018). The culmination of the investigation ended in FIFA and UEFA banning Russia and Russian football clubs from football tournament on all levels (FIFA, 2022).

Sportswashing is a controversial topic because it points to the extent an entity will go to divert attention especially when in a negative light. The outrage from the fans is around the idea that in a situation like Russia's the handed out punishments were nothing more than a slap on the wrist. Oligarchs who were forced to sell their teams got to keep the billions of dollars involved in the sale. Gazprom although it has terminated all its sponsorship deals, the globalization of its brand is way beyond the football field and even the temporarily banned Russia was not too incensed about the decision because they were less than 4 years removed from been host countries and the significant tourism buzz that comes from hosting the world cup hadn't completely died down. As fans it is important to publicly advocate controversial investments in football especially in the grass root and local levels where we have major influence. In the higher levels as well, we should continue to display our hostilities behind some of these investments, so as to protect the safety our game provides been corrupted by controversial parties.

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