

Has the final whistle of the World Cup changed the score for Russia?

Blog post by Managing Director Benjamin Wegg-Prosser, 18 July 2018

The torrential downpour which greeted President Putin as he walked onto the turf at the Luzhniki Stadium as the final whistle brought the 21st World Cup to an end was the only cloud over a tournament graced with many footballing silver linings. His counterpart at FIFA, President Infantino, had declared before the final that the championship was “changing the perception of Russia, particularly in the west.” For observers in the Kremlin totting up the cost of the tournament, judging whether the FIFA President is right is their next task.

Given the downbeat predictions before the tournament, from boycotts to hooliganism, racism to second-rate infrastructure, there is no doubt that the local organising committee dealt with many of the negatives which observers had assumed the World Cup would encounter. While in the aftermath of the Salisbury diplomatic expulsions in March there was some talk of a wider boycott which failed to materialise. The Russian hooligans who made such a name for themselves in France at the European Championship two years ago clearly decided that they preferred picking mushrooms to bashing foreigners. The racist abuse which some predicted from the terraces was seldom heard, indeed the sheer diversity of fans from Senegal to South Korea and Iran to Colombia, all of whom travelled in vast numbers, projected the breadth of the football’s appeal in its most attractive light. The new stadia built to host the tournament may turn into white elephants, but for now, there are no better examples of modern, compact and atmospheric football venues anywhere in the world. Most importantly, billions of global TV viewers have been presented with entertaining content projected onto a Russian backdrop into their homes and phones for the past month.

The question is whether this will change the calculus of the global political elite. Will sanctions be lifted? Will the pro-Russian voices around the European Council have more clout? Will Russia’s claims on Crimea be recognised more widely?

On the basis of the facts currently presented, the answer can only be no. As with the *telemosts* (literal translation: TV bridges) which were broadcasted in the cold war for American and Soviet citizens to communicate directly, there is no evidence that cultural affinity between the peoples of geopolitical rivals leads to a thawing of relations between leaders. While the last great global sports jamboree held at the Luzhniki stadium, then named the Lenin Stadium, for the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics took place at a time of even greater political tensions in the aftermath of the Red Army’s invasion of Afghanistan, and was followed by a significant uptick in tensions as the Americans deployed enhanced nuclear capabilities across western Europe. Indeed, a Russian police officer interviewed on TV after the closing ceremony noted how sad he was that the tournament

was over, as for the previous few weeks he and his colleagues had felt “like abroad”. There are further parallels with 1980, where one of the most memorable features of those Olympics was the curious appearance of Pepsi-Cola and Marlboro cigarettes in local stores, conveniently timed for the arrival of foreign guests. Whether these melancholy comments lead to anything more profound in Russia is another matter; looking back, it was perhaps foolish for anyone to doubt the Russians ability to put on a great show - after all, Potemkin villages have their origins in another Russian empire.

It will take more than a football tournament, no matter how memorable, to re-build the fractured relationship between Russia and the west. Just as the cold war was concluded with one side deciding that their current economic model was broken and compelling it to take a different course, so will this current impasse be resolved through one side being required to change out of necessity, not thanks to the warm afterglow of the beautiful game in a Moscow thunderstorm.