



How Putin used the World Cup to repair Russia's Image

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France and Croatia play the final of the World Football Championship final in 2018 on Sunday. Immediately after the semifinals were over and it became clear that the Gallic cockpit team will face Luka Modric et co, the sports analysts rushed to give their opinion about the two camps, the odds of the bands to play at Lujinski Stadium, and the chances that the Croatian players - considered to have the second chance - to respect the Hexagon.

(Photo source: Youtube)

But political analysts are far more categorical: no matter what happens Sunday afternoon and which teams will go home with the 18-carat Gold FIFA World Cup, Vladimir Putin is the true winner of the 2018 World Cup. opinion circulated by various journalists and Western experts, for whom the authoritarian leader of the Kremlin comes out most earned after the sporting event of the year. The specialists consulted by G4Media.ro are also convinced that the former KGB agent, who has been rushing with an iron hand Russia for nearly 20 years, is the one who has benefited from the obsession of the football world.

A few weeks ago, USA Today wrote: "[No matter what happens, Vladimir Putin wins the World Cup](#) ." Perhaps the title seems brutal and exaggerated, but it reflects the opinion of many analysts who believe that the World Football Championship in 2018 has given Putin the perfect opportunity to repair Russia's international reputation, which has been badly affected lately. And the Kremlin tsar took full advantage of this opportunity.

Within four years, following the invasion and annexation of the Crimean region of Ukraine, Russia was subjected to severe international sanctions, many Russian oligarchs and oligarchs were blacklisted in Western countries, hundreds of Moscow diplomats were sent back home from their posts abroad, the Kremlin was pointed to blow down Malaysia Airlines over Ukraine and assassinate some of its former spies, and Putin was virulently criticized for helping Syrian dictator Bashar al-Sadat. In addition, the economy of the country is in deringolada, the ruble suffocates, the press is constantly harassed, and the political opponents

are persecuted. Even sport was not out of scandal. Mass-related smoking has affected Russian athletes, including Russia's last big sports event,

It is not surprising that, at a time when Russia's international reputation is visibly impaired, Putin manipulated and used the World Cup as an ideal propaganda tool to repair the country's image. "People will understand what Russia is when they come here," he said recently. "There are still many remaining stereotypes in the past."

And the reality of the World Cup seems to confirm the statements of the Kremlin leader. The football feast has shown the Russian Federation as a surprising tourist destination. According to USA Today, tens of thousands of tourists and supporters who visited the country in the last month were delighted by the sunny weather, the greatness of Moscow - a capital generally known for its cold, black money and political games - and a general atmosphere of friendship and openness. With few exceptions, the stadiums in the 11 cities were almost full, and the crowds were enthusiastic. Reports on violent incidents, racism and organizational shortcomings were few. The Russian hooligans, usually an extremely brutal group, did not feel their presence (it is said that the Federal Security Service, the successor of the KGB fear, had "preventive talks" with their leaders before the tournament began to discourage violence. In general, foreign tourists spoke of positive experiences in Russia. In addition, the high level of football played contributed to the perception that this is one of the best World Cups in recent decades.

From a political point of view, the planetary influence of the sporting event allowed Putin to appear as a powerful leader, who maintains himself in the official tribune with the presidents and prime ministers of the four streets, and even tries in the backstage of the tour to act as a mediator and to make peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians (Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas were invited to the Sunday final).

And the reaction of foreigners was in the way. If the political leaders and the royal family in the UK - one of the most hostile Western countries to the current Kremlin policies - said they would boycott the competition after the poisoning scandal of a former Russian refugee agent in England, their decision seems to have been almost singular, the head of British diplomacy, Boris Johnson, compared the World Cup in Russia with the 1936 Olympics in Hitler's Germany). Many countries have embraced the event and seem to have forgotten a few weeks of Russia's aggressive behavior. A few days ago, Donald Trump National Security Advisor, John Bolton, visited the Kremlin to set the summit between the two leaders, and the media reported that he had asked Putin for advice on how to run a successful tournament. President Trump, who will meet with Putin in Helsinki on July 16, also praised the tour, saying that Russia "is doing a fantastic World Wide World job right now." An impressive array of foreign politicians stumbled over Putin: the president Moldovan premier Igor Dodon, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, French and Croatian presidents, Emmanuel Macron and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic are just a few of them.

Very likely, the leaders of Moscow are in the ninth heaven. With hundreds of thousands of fans all over the world who visit Russia and take advantage of the flawless organization of the football tournament, almost no one talks about Crimea, about human rights violations or about political prisoners. Even if only temporarily, Putin's goal was met.



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sport is used by autocrats. But Putin did not use the World Cup organized by Russia just to wash out the country's image abroad. The madness of football allowed Putin to implement his internal political agenda. While the country was covered by tournament fever and surprising national team winnings (low-scaled at the start of the competition), the Moscow government decided to increase the retirement age of the Russians. Although the new law has significant effects on tens of millions of people and expected to be massively

challenged, criticism was limited, and disapproving voices were lost in supporters' chanting and patriotic songs celebrating their qualifying for Spain. In this case, the World Cup came at the right time for Putin (the measure,

Undoubtedly, the surprising run of the national team led by Stanislav Cherchesov - ranked 70th in the world ranking before the start of the tournament - also had an immediate effect on Russian supporters. Putin is a man who likes victories, and the victory of the Russian team against Spain, for example, was a huge one. Almost overnight, the Russians discovered that they have a competitive national team and have joined them with a nearly fanatical patriotism. Soccer players "are not people with weapons but people with talent and luck. And we love them," said a Russian who attends the general party.

A lot in the delusion celebrated the victory against Spain near the monument of Marshal Jukov near the Kremlin, waving a huge flag. Soldiers and policemen deployed in Red Square, usually known for their brutality with reprisals of any unauthorized demonstration, also participated in collective joy with local supporters as well as fans from Peru, Mexico, Colombia, Angola, Panama, Japan, Egypt or Morocco.

Another party took place on the sidewalk near Lubyanka, the headquarters of the Federal Security Service, where hundreds of exuberant supporters chanted and sang until late at night. Even Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader who has been arrested several times by the Russian authorities, has entered the fever of the competition and

wrote on Twitter after his victory with Spain: "Yessss! We must organize a series of protests to demand that Akinfeev be declared Hero of Russia. "Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former tycoon imprisoned by Putin, also sent an exuberant tweet:" Incredibly! "The joy of the Russians was general that he came not only from those in power, but also from those who oppose them. Such a victory felt like a personal victory for every Russian, whether or not he supported Putin's authoritarian government.

Press correspondents have written that wherever you look in Moscow or in the farther cities of the Federation, the Russians now proudly wear national team t-shirts, and Ros-si-ya, Ros-si-ya "scandals are no longer just released matches in stadiums, but are heard in parks, subways and supermarkets. For many Russians, the unsuccessful success of the national team is largely due to Putin, which has made Russia the right to organize the final tournament. The World Cup thus made Putin appear as "a man of the people." The Kremlin leader continues to benefit from great popularity among Russian voters, who credit him with stabilizing the country in the early 2000s, after a chaotic decade followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The conclusion of USA Today is that Russia's team has its heroes, such as Artem Dzyuba, Denis Cheryshev and Igor Akinfeev, "but the great winner of all these things is Putin." It is hard not to notice that things have been arranged perfectly for the leader from the Kremlin. Putin's methods, policies, and opinions have not changed and remain as

shocking to many, but the fact that people have not talked about them "is the biggest political victory of all."



Football and politics. Why did this happen? Why does Putin, an autocratic leader and act aggressively against the West, seems to be seen as the winner of such a beloved and tracked competition on the entire planet? The explanation is even offered by American journalists: "We like it or not, this is the power of the sport and the World Cup force. The hosting of one is an epic production, and this (from Russia) took place without any mistake. "Recently, Putin has offered to give a forecast about the possible outcome of the competition, Putin replied with confidence:" the winners will be the organizers. "In other words , he and his government.

G4Media.ro asked Douglas Hartmann, a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota and a researcher of the relationship between sport and politics, who believes in the idea that the World Cup helps repair the international reputation of Putin and Russia. "I think there is a strong reason behind this suggestion. Major sporting events such as the World Cup can not only distract the audience from other issues, more problematic social issues and political upheaval, but they often help build the popularity and legitimacy of governing parties and leaders. This is especially true when nationalism that is associated with international sports competitions is doubled by successful sports performance and repeatedly transferred,

According to Professor Hartmann, this happens even if the Russian team left the competition and did not fight for any place on the podium. "I think the team itself has gone far beyond expectations, so this contributes to the benefits that Putin receives for the success of the tournament in general."

The same opinion was shared by Richard Lapchick, who is among others the director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, where G4Media.ro asked what he thinks about the idea that the President of Russia is the true winner of the World Cup. "I totally agree," was Lapchick's secular response.

Putin has invested for years to make Russia win the World Cup, considering it not only a chance to attract the world's attention to his country, but also to distract the Russians from the economy in

stagnation, crackdown and widespread corruption. Increasingly isolated on the world stage, the Kremlin tsar used the tournament to send a defiant message to his opponents - that Russia succeeds despite the Western efforts to defeat it.

Exceeding expectations, recent geopolitical tensions and the remembrance of the country's brutal history, the Moscow Government turned the World Cup into an event appreciated by hundreds of thousands of tourists and supporters. True, Russia won the right to organize the World Cup in 2010 long before annexing the Crimea, to engage military in the war in Syria, to leave in the elections in the United States, and generally to become a pariah on the international stage. This, however, does not reduce the way that Putin and others around him take advantage of the popularity of the competition to pursue their interests. "It is a success of the Putin regime, regardless of our attitude towards it," and the Kremlin leadership will use it as such, "Dmitri Dubrovski, historian at the Center for Independent Social Research in St. Petersburg, said. Petersburg. Many voices argue that the FIFA leadership, which consistently politicized the World Cup, allowing the repressive regimes to organize the final tournament (Argentina in 1978, Russia this year, Qatar in 2022) belongs to the FIFA leadership.

Human rights organizations are especially afraid that the sporting event will further strengthen the position of the Russian president who used the tournament and to strengthen his authoritarian, conservative and nationalist approach to government. And the statement of the Kremlin spokesman, Dmitry S. Peskov, who compared the crowd of Russian

supporters extravasated with the one seen in the "Historical Images of 9 May 1945," the date of the capitulation of Nazi Germany in the Second World War, is a proof of attitude general of Russian rulers. For them, the World Championship is not just a sports competition, but much more. It is about patriotism, nationalism, the glory of Russia and the grandeur of the former empire, the power of President Putin, and his absolute power over both the Russians and the enemy of the West.

The four weeks since the start of the competition and the seductive football show have worked hand in hand with Putin's government agenda. The Sunday final between France and Croatia will end the competition. The agitation of the tournament will slowly quench, but that does not mean that the issues that have made Russia more and more fearful and suspicious will disappear with the final whistle of Nestor Pitana's center. A few days after the end of the Sochi Olympics in 2014, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, triggering a major international crisis. The natural question we have to ask now is: what plans does Putin have after the World Cup 2018 is over?

Sources: USA Today, Chicago Tribune, Esquire, CNN, New York Times, Foreign Policy, Euronews, Washington Post