Kommentar/Commentary

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Issues around the FIFA World Cup 2018 in Russia: A showcase of how sports and politics mix

Wie die FIFA Fußball-Weltmeisterschaft 2018 in Russland exemplarisch belegt, dass Sport und Politik nicht voneinander zu trennen sind

DOI 10.1515/sug-2018-0013

Summery: The 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia was another demonstration in how sports and politics mix. In protest of Russian politics, few leaders from Western countries attended. For this World Cup, public resources were misused in that half of the stadiums built in Russia were left as "white elephants" with no long-term use. The tournament in Russia marked a shift from the West to the East with sponsors from authoritarian countries having saved the business model of FIFA. The policy of fining misconduct during the World Cup showed FIFA's commitment to protect its remaining sponsors while proclaimed values, such as fighting racism, were of minor importance. The case of Iranian women using the opportunity not only to attend their national team's games in Russia but also to advocate for the right of women to enter stadiums in Iran showed that football can also be an agent for social change. In two countries (Germany, United States), World Cup matches hosted female commentators on television for the first time. In Belgium, players operated largely above the Flemish-Walloon divide. The article concludes by comparing the last World Cup in Russia with the next one in Qatar and identifying topics for future research.

Zusammenfassung: Die FIFA Fußball-Weltmeisterschaft 2018 in Russland war ein erneuter Beleg dafür, dass Sport und Politik nicht voneinander zu trennen sind. Aus Protest gegen die Politik Russlands blieben die meisten westlichen Staatsoberhäupter bewusst der WM fern. Die Fußball-Weltmeisterschaft 2018

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war ein Beispiel für die missbräuchliche Verwendung öffentlicher Gelder. Die Hälfte aller WM-Stadien wird nach dem Wettbewerb ohne langfristige Nutzung als „weiße Elefanten“ zurückbleiben. Das Turnier in Russland markierte eine Verschiebung von westlichen hin zu Sponsoren aus autoritären Ländern, die das Geschäfts-Modell der FIFA gerettet haben. Das Vorgehen der FIFA, Fehlverhalten während der WM zu ahnden, verfolgte das Hauptinteresse, die verbliebenden Sponsoren zu schützen. Proklamierte Werte wie der Kampf gegen Rassismus mussten dem hintenanstehen.

Der Fall iranischer Frauen, die die Möglichkeit genutzt haben, Spiele ihrer Nationalmannschaft in Russland zu besuchen und dabei gegen das Stadionverbot für Frauen in ihrem Heimatland zu demonstrieren, hat gezeigt, dass Fußball durchaus auch als Vehikel für sozialen Wandel dienen kann. In zwei Ländern, Deutschland und den Vereinigten Staaten, wurden WM-Spiele im Fernsehen erstmals von Frauen kommentiert. In Belgien haben flämische und wallonische Nationalspieler die einstmalige Binnen-Trennung überwunden.

Am Ende vergleicht der Artikel die letzte WM in Russland mit der nächsten in Katar und identifiziert Themen für zukünftige Forschung zu Fußballweltmeisterschaften.

Preface

The neoliberal mantra international sports governing bodies such as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) follow is that sports and politics do not mix. The rationale of this mantra bases itself on pure capitalism: It is easier to sell sports around the world when unbothered by public discussions about “inconvenient” issues such as workers’ and minority rights in host countries. This approach worked fairly well at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, with the exception of the World Cup final when members of the punk collective Pussy Riot ran onto the pitch, calling “for the release of political prisoners, the end for illegal detentions at political rallies, stopping the policing of people’s political views on social media and for more open political competition” (“Pussy Riot members jailed”, 2018). The action at the time was hardly noticed, since FIFA does not permit stadium cameras to show spectators running onto the field; newspapers all over the world reported the incident, including photographic coverage. Regardless, the event remained a niche topic in coverage of the spectacular final match between France and Croatia.

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The recent World Cup in Russia and the next one to be held in Qatar are not the first instances of awarding the greatest event of the most popular sport in the world to an authoritarian country: In 1978 the World Cup was hosted by Argentina, a military dictatorship at that time. The Olympic Summer Games took place in 2008 in China and the Olympic Winter Games in 2018 in Russia. Authoritarian countries are for FIFA and the IOC a convenient choice: Popular protests generally do not occur in these countries as they did in Brazil prior to the 2014 FIFA World Cup. In mass demonstrations in Brazil people protested the allocation of public resources for stadiums rather than for health and education. On the other hand, no hooliganism occurred as it did at the European Football championship in 2016 in France. While the public tends to turn its attention during mega-sporting events such as the last World Cup towards what is happening on the pitch, the tournament in Russia was yet another demonstration in how sports and politics mix. Plenty of examples will be presented in this essay, demonstrating that football is far more than just a game.

Political Boycotts

Democratic countries such as Germany and the United States do not protest against mega-sporting events in authoritarian countries by calling for their athletes to boycott the games. Previous boycotts, such as the US-led boycott of the Olympic Summer Games in Moscow in 1980, were in fact unsuccessful. Despite this boycott to protest the invasion into Afghanistan, the Soviet Union did not completely withdraw its troops until 1989. The main victims of Jimmy Carter's initiative to abstain from the Moscow Games were the Western athletes who could not participate in the greatest multi-sporting event in the world. For many athletes this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to participate in the Olympics was one that they missed. Perhaps the only successful boycott was that of South African players, which lasted decades and might have contributed to apartheid's end.

While no country asked its athletes to abstain from the 2018 World Cup, the boycott happened on a different level: Few leaders from Western countries attended. The few exceptions were leaders from countries that advanced in the tournament and wanted to support their national teams. According to the Kremlin website, only 17 heads of states and governments attended the opening ceremony and first match of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in which Russia played against Saudi Arabia. The list includes only two out of 32 countries that participated in the World Cup: Panama (a first-time participant) and Saudi-Arabia. Two of the listed countries are not even recognized by a vast majority of countries in the world: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Granting these countries the global spotlight served

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the purpose of helping them in their unpromising struggle for international recognition, which has so far mainly been supported by Russia and Venezuela. The other countries present were mostly authoritarian countries (listed alphabetically): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Moldova, Paraguay, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and North Korea (President of Russia, 2018). There were no heads of state from Germany, the United Kingdom, and France, for example. Emmanuel Macron (and the same applies to the Croatian president) came to Russia at a later stage of the tournament only due to the success of France's national team, which, at the end, won the tournament in a spectacular final against Croatia. In the case of England, even the success of the national football team did not sway the government. While many leaders such as Angela Merkel did not give the public reasons for their absence from the World Cup, "Prime Minister Theresa May ordered officials including Prince William, who's president of the English Football Association, to boycott the World Cup over the nerve-agent poisoning of a former spy in England that the U.K. blames on the Kremlin" (Halpin & Kuzmanovic, 2018).

White Elephants

The awarding of this mega-sporting event is not the only highly political decision. Within host countries, the events are more than just part of a game. This particularly concerns the use of public resources. There is a regrettable path dependency of the misuse of public resources at previous World Cups: As in South Africa 2010 and Brazil 2014, the FIFA World Cup 2018 left "white elephants" in the host country Russia. White elephants are infrastructure (in this case stadiums) built for a mega-sporting events that have no long-term use. According to an article in the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, five of the 12 World Cup stadiums were built in cities without a first league football team: Sochi, Kaliningrad, Nizhny Novgorod, Saransk, and Volgograd. Some of these cities do not even have a second league team. The Luzhniki Stadium, the venue of the opening and final match of the 2018 World Cup, is in Moscow, a city with several first league teams - all have their own stadiums and none have so far been interested in moving. Regarding all other stadiums, it is important to note that the average attendance in the first Russian football league is only 14,000, far below the capacity of the renovated and expanded World Cup stadiums. Ten of the 12 stadiums have capacities beyond 40,000 (Aumüller, 2018).

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The Economy of the World Cup

More than ever before this World Cup showcased what it is really about: capitalism and excessive commercialization. After the much-reported corruption cases within FIFA that led in 2015 to the arrest of several FIFA officials and a six-year ban from participation in FIFA activities for former FIFA president Blatter, many sponsors distanced themselves from the world football governing body. According to an article in *The Conversation*,

> "FIFA's image had become so toxic, in fact, numerous major brands decided not renew their contracts in 2014-15: Sony, Emirates, Continental, Johnson & Johnson and Castrol. ... Altogether, just 20 of the 34 commercial spots for the World Cup have been sold. This will undoubtedly cost FIFA hundreds of millions of dollars." (Hughes, 2018)

The damage could have been much worse had brands from China (Dalian Wanda, Hisense, Vivo, Mengniu Dairy), Qatar (Qatar Airways), and Russia (Gazprom) not stepped in. Hence companies from authoritarian countries have saved the business model of FIFA, which is officially a non-profit organization. FIFA generates most of its billion-dollar revenue from the men's World Cup.

Celebrating Capitalism

During the World Cup several instances occurred which showed that FIFA would do just about anything to protect its remaining sponsors while proclaimed values, such as fighting racism, were of minor importance. When the host country played (and lost) against Uruguay in the group stage of the tournament, Russian fans displayed a neo-Nazi banner during the match. The Russian football federation was fined $10,100 by FIFA. After losing against Switzerland, the Serbian coach Krstajic accused the German referee Brych of biased refereeing by stating, "I wouldn't give him either a yellow or red card, I would send him to the Hague. Then they could put him on trial, like they did to us" ("Fifa ermittelt gegen Xhaka und Shaqiri", 2018). Suggesting the referee be sent to the International Criminal Tribunal cost Krstajic a FIFA fine of $5,000. On the other hand, Sweden was penalized by FIFA $65,000, and Croatia and England were fined $70,700 each for wearing unauthorized socks (England, Sweden) and drinking "non-authorized beverage products" on the pitch (Croatia) (D'Andrea, 2018; Wolff, 2018). Maybe the harshest penalty issued by FIFA was a warning to the Croatian goalkeeper after he wore a T-shirt honoring a deceased former teammate (Amoyal, 2018; Das, 2018).

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Centers and Peripheries

The shift from the West to the East might continue in the future, not only concerning sponsorship. While FIFA had no other choice than to award the World Cup 2026 to the combined bid of Canada, Mexico, and the United States – given the poor quality of the only other bid, from Morocco, as well as the US's controversial loss against Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup – China is aiming to host one of the next World Cups. Its tremendous sponsoring efforts in FIFA and global football serve this purpose. China is already an Olympic superpower though in terms of football, it is still considered a developing country. The Chinese government has figured out that football success matters more to the people than, for example, weightlifting gold medals, and it is aiming to close the gap in football by heavily investing in the sport on all levels (through domestic participation, the local professional league, and international investments).

The example of China (a country that did not qualify for the 2018 World Cup) shows that when it comes to sport, centers and peripheries of football are far more stable than the tournament's economy. With four European teams in the semi-final remaining, football looked more like a World Cup in handball, one of the most Eurocentric sports. Beyond the group stage, only European and South American countries were left. The only exception in the second round was Japan, a highly developed Asian country. For other countries from Asia, Africa, and Oceania, just participating in the 2018 World Cup was enough. In today's football world, it is difficult for a country to be competitive without having players in the European top leagues. From the four semi-finalists of the 2018 World Cup (Belgium, Croatia, England, and France), 88% (81 out of 92 players) played in England, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. Forty out of the 92 players played in the English Premier League, 12 were each from the Spanish La Liga and the French Ligue 1, nine came from the German Bundesliga, and eight were from Italy's Serie A. Tottenham Hotspur Football Club was the best-represented club in the semifinals, with nine players including the captain from world-champion France (Liew, 2018).

Football as an Agent for Social Change

Football is the most popular game in the world and can be an agent for social change. The most powerful message at the World Cup in this regard was sent by Iranian women. Having been banned from entering stadiums in Iran, they travelled to Russia to support their team that qualified for the World Cup. While the team, after some excellent performances, had to exit the tournament after the group stage, Iranian women used the opportunity not only to attend their

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national team's games but also to advocate for the right of women to enter stadiums in Iran. FIFA and local authorities in Russia did not intervene when Iranian supporters, both men and women, displayed banners in the stadium with the hashtag and slogan "#NoBan4Women Support Iranian women to attend stadiums". FIFA argued that "the banners are considered by FIFA to express a social appeal as opposed to a political slogan and were therefore not prohibited under the relevant regulations" (Kanso, 2018).

A surprising development happened in Iran on June 20, 2018 when Iranian women were permitted along with men to enter the Azadi Stadium in Tehran to watch the last match of the group stage between Iran and Spain on stadium screens. The website *Al-Monitor* commented, "Now, there are hopes that this will pave the way for subsequent orders that allow women to watch live games at stadiums, too" (Jafari, 2018).

Football is in most parts of the world a male-dominated sport and space, although not everywhere as extreme as in Iran (and Gulf countries such as Saudi-Arabia), a country that even chooses to ban female spectators. In two countries, Germany and the United States, World Cup matches hosted female commentators on television for the first time. In the United States it was Aly Wagner and in Germany, Claudia Neumann. The two women come from different backgrounds: Wagner was a two-time Olympic gold medalist and two-time FIFA Women's World Cup bronze medalist before becoming a sports broadcaster (Terranova, 2018) while Neumann is "only" a journalist (similarly, most male commentators have not previously been professional football players). Many hateful comments were made against Neumann on German social media which showed that while people in the West like drawing attention to discrimination against women in countries such as Iran, gender equality is also still far from becoming reality in parts of the world considered more progressive. Neumann is an experienced sports broadcaster who has commented on matches at the European football championship in 2016 and has worked as a reporter since 1991 (in the beginning of her career, she mainly covered women football matches). She rightfully said in an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit* that the reactions to her work "are no Claudia-Neumann-problem, they are a societal problem" (Gilbert, 2018). Neumann's employer, TV channel ZDF, pressed criminal charges against some persons responsible for hate posts made against her.

Between Integration and Racism

Football can be a tool for social cohesion. A best practice case at this World Cup was the Belgium national team that beat Brazil in the quarterfinal and finished

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the tournament ranking third. According to an article about the team in *Financial Times*,

> "In the 1980s, there were unofficial quotas for Walloon and Flemish players so that both regions would feel equally represented by the team. Walloons and Flemings sat at separate tables at team meals. Overseeing it all, to keep everyone happy, was a bilingual manager." (Kuper, 2018)

Today, the team is operating "largely above the Flemish-Walloon divide. The squad's working language is English" (Kuper, 2018).

Belgium featured players from very different points of origin such as the Congo, Mali, and Morocco, and many other countries were made up of diverse squads. While diversity within teams is rightfully considered a sign of integration, the 2018 World Cup also revealed that some immigrant players are often the first to be blamed in cases of sporting failure. Jimmy Durmaz, a Swedish player born in Sweden to Assyrian parents, was racially abused online after causing a free-kick that led to Germany's 95th-minute winning goal against Sweden in the group stage. He posted a video statement the day after the match:

> "I would just like to say a few things regarding what happened after the game yesterday. I am a footballer at the highest level so I have to accept that I am criticized for what I do on the pitch. That's part of the job – and I am always willing to accept that. But there are limits and that limit was passed yesterday. When someone threatens me, when they call me darkie, bloody Arab, terrorist, Taliban ... then that limit has been passed. And what is even worse, when they go after my family and my children and threaten them ... who the hell does that kind of thing? I am Swedish and I am proud to represent the Swedish national team – it is the biggest thing you can do as a footballer. I will never let any racists destroy my pride. We all have to make a stand against racism."

After Durmaz finished reading his statement, the entire Swedish squad and staff who had lined up behind him said, "Fuck racism" ("Sweden squad rally", 2018).

In spite of the loss against Germany, Sweden advanced to the next round of the World Cup while surprisingly the reigning world champion had to exit the tournament after the group stage. According to many media, particularly German tabloid *BILD*, Mesut Özil, who was born in Germany to parents from Turkey, was one of the players most responsible for the sporting failure. When Özil resigned from the German national team after the tournament, he criticized disrespect of his Turkish roots and racism in Germany in a written statement on Twitter (Özil, 2018). However, his case is more complex than that of Jimmy Durmaz though Özil was certainly facing severe racism on social media. Özil, who has only German and no Turkish citizenship, took pictures in May 2018 with the autocratic Turkish

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president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. *BILD* accused Özil of disloyalty to Germany and argued that with this controversial action the German national team's preparation was disturbed, which contributed to the sporting failure. Other newspapers took a different stance, arguing that the case of Özil would show that German athletes with immigration backgrounds would remain second-class citizens and only find acceptance in cases of success.

Citizenship of Convenience

As Spiro writes in *At Home in Two Countries: The Past and Future of Dual Citizenship*, dual citizenship has become a fact of globalization with near-universal tolerance. According to Spiro, "Dual citizenship increases the strategic use of citizenship on the part of individuals" (Spiro, 2016, S.139). Related to the world of sports, he coins the phrase "Olympic citizenship" to describe the phenomenon, which is defined as "cases in which athletes aren't good enough for their home-country teams but are good enough for others" (Spiro, 2016, S. 141).

At the 2018 tournament in Russia, the most extreme example of what Spiro described as "the strategic use of citizenship" was the team of Morocco, which was, according to *The New York Times*, "an imported Team for the World Cup" (Panja, 2018). Similar to the Algerian team at the 2014 World Cup, described by *The Washington Post* as "the other French team" (Ross, 2018), the Moroccan team was mainly comprised of diaspora players. Seventeen out of the 23 Moroccan players were born outside of Morocco but chose to represent the home of their parents and/or grandparents. In comparison, the last World Cup team from Morocco in 1998 had only two players born outside the North African kingdom. Morocco's top scorer, Dutch-born Hakim Ziyech, played for the national youth teams of the Netherlands and represented his country of birth until 2015. When the Dutch failed to reach the 2016 European Championship, he began to play for Morocco, the team he represented at the 2018 World Cup in Russia. For *The New York Times*, "the story of Morocco's successful qualification is perhaps the best modern illustration of how nations have turned to a global diaspora to achieve success in soccer" (Panja, 2018).

Apart from cases of dual citizenship, which were also prevalent in other teams such as Senegal, some national teams also naturalized foreign-born players. For example, Russia gave citizenship to Mário Figueira Fernandes. Fernandes played in 2014 a friendly for his country of birth, Brazil, before starting in 2015 to represent Russia where he had played at club level since 2012. Given the widespread racism in Russian stadiums and protests against the recruitment of black players, it might be no coincidence that Russia naturalized a white Brazilian player.

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From Nationalism to Cosmopolitanism

At the World Cup countries compete with each other. National symbols are proudly displayed. Flags are hoisted, and the national anthems of both teams are played before every single match. Players are expected to sing, and if they fail to do so (as did the German player Mesut Özil), they are heavily criticized in their countries. However, the previous World Cup showed that the greatest sporting event is more than a display of nationalism and that there are also elements of internationalism and cosmopolitanism. People beyond the 32 countries that qualified for the event were excited about the World Cup. In Lebanon, for example, flags of participating countries (particularly those from Brazil, Germany, and France) were hoisted all over the country. People chose "their" team out of sympathy for certain players or countries without having any personal connections to them (such as having lived in the country or having family living there). In Germany, when the German national team had already exited the tournament after the group stage, people still met in beer gardens to watch World Cup matches; TV stations were positively surprised about high viewership numbers at matches without German participation ("Einschaltquoten", 2018).

Interestingly, the highest number of tickets (88,825) sold abroad for the World Cup in Russia was in a country that did not qualify for the event: the United States. According to FIFA, China, another country that did not qualify, also made it in the top-ten statistic of tickets purchased abroad (40,251) (FIFA, 2018).

While football players need to be nationals of the countries they represent (as opposed to rugby, for example, where proof of residency is sufficient), on the staff level foreign nationals are becoming more and more accepted. While four-time world champion Germany still awaits its first foreign head coach, 13 out of 32 countries (40%) at the 2018 World Cup had a foreign head coach: Australia, Belgium, Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, Iran, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Saudi Arabia, and Switzerland. Also, some of those countries with a domestic coach already had previous experience of being coached by a foreigner. England, for example, used to be coached by Sven Goran Eriksson from Sweden and Fabio Capello from Italy (Spencer, 2018).

From Russia to Qatar

The next FIFA World Cup 2022 will be hosted by Qatar, another authoritarian country. Apart from its non-democratic nature (though Qatar ranks slightly higher than Russia in democracy and freedom of the press indexes), it does not have much in common with Russia. The differences are first of all noticeable in terms

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of population and country size: According to the World Factbook of the Central Intelligence Agency, as of July 2017 Russia had 61.5 times more inhabitants than Qatar (142,257,519 to 2,314,307), and its land area is 1,476 times larger (Russia boasts 17,098,242 sq. km to Qatar's 11,586 sq. km). These differences will change the character of the World Cup tremendously (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018a; 2018b). The 2022 World Cup will be an event of short distances, something players and fans traveling to the event might enjoy. The fact that the tournament will take place in December (and not, as is usual, in the summer) upsets the top European leagues organized from August to May, but it will be enjoyed by countries such as the United States, Russia, and Norway (if they qualify), which traditionally organize their leagues from the beginning until the end of the calendar year and have had to interrupt their local leagues for past World Cups.

Russia and Qatar's motives to host the World Cup are also quite different from each other. For Russia, the motive to host both this tournament and the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2016 was domestic - the country aimed to prove to its own population a return to its old greatness. Qatar, surrounded by larger and more powerful countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, has been using sports strategically as a foreign policy tool that contributes to national security and allows the country to gain soft power, as the author has argued in previous publications (Reiche, 2015). Qatar wants by all means to avoid the fate of Kuwait, which was invaded by a larger neighboring state, Iraq, in 1990 and had to be liberated by a US-led alliance in 1991.

The perception of sport as a national security tool was confirmed after the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and some allies, which started in June 2017. Hassan Hassan wrote in *Foreign Policy* an article entitled "Qatar Won the Saudi Blockade" in which he argued,

> "A year on, however, Qatar has not only weathered the storm - it also appears to have emerged as the main winner of the conflict. The anti-Qatar quartet failed in its mission of forcing Qatar to accept its 13 demands, which included shutting down *Al Jazeera* and other media outlets said to be funded by Doha, and to cease support for various regional Islamist groups, ostensibly both Sunni and Shiite." (Hassan, 2018)

Though Hassan fails to mention it, sport might have contributed to that "victory". In order to cleverly change the conversation about Qatar in the global media, the country transferred the Brazilian player Neymar Jr. to Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain directly after the start of the diplomatic crisis.

Another interesting issue was the 2018 World Cup opening match between Russia and Saudi Arabia. During the game, Qatar Airways advertisements appeared on the perimeter board in the stadium, which was clearly a goal for Qatar in the context of the conflict with Saudi Arabia and humiliating for the Saudis.

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The blocking of Qatar's BeIN Sports channel in Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as the launch of a most likely state-sponsored pirate channel, was another escalation harmful to Saudi Arabia's image. However, Qatar will only achieve its foreign policy goals to gain soft power if it can meet the expectations of Western countries to reform the country, particularly when it comes to improving the living and working conditions of migrant workers.

Conclusion

Most research on mega-sporting events covers the tournaments themselves and developments prior to them. Future research should focus more on post-event developments and investigate to which extent they have contributed to social change in the host country as well as in participating countries. Will the huge expenses for the World Cup in Russia be compensated by budget cuts for social services? Concerning participating countries, will the 2018 World Cup in Russia mark the beginning of an era of more gender equality in Iran, for example, in which women are allowed to enter stadiums to watch men playing football?

Future research should also address the political criteria under which international sports governing bodies should award mega-sporting events to countries. The heated debate that is already happening around the 2022 World Cup in Qatar shows that many people believe that multi-billion-dollar organizations such as FIFA should not only care about the quality of stadiums during the World Cup but also the societal environment in which they were built, which includes, amongst many other issues, the rights of the workers on stadium construction sides and the long-term use of the facilities.

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