

# Staging Sochi 2014: The Soft Power of Geocultural Politics in the Olympic Opening Ceremony

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*This essay examines the polarizing politics of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. I analyse the function of soft-power diplomacy in the design of the opening ceremony in relation to the international controversy around these games over the repression of civil and human rights. The Sochi Olympics became a lightning rod inciting pro-Western democratic protests against and Russian neo-national support for President Vladimir V. Putin's cultural reform programme. I argue that the Sochi stage was the opening scene of a much larger cultural propaganda campaign reflecting the government's move to boost a conservative world view. Sochi's spectacle mediated a reform strategy designed to reinvent Russian identity and restore Russia's global status. For contrast, I look back to the opening ceremony of the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics and its vision of Soviet society in order to highlight the changing contexts in which soft power underscores broader objectives in geocultural politics.*

Prior to the 7 February opening of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, arriving journalists tweeted images of double toilets, unfinished construction sites, stray dogs, hazardous hotel rooms and awkward translations that spread across social media. Spawning Twitter hashtags such as #sochiproblems and #sochifail, the media focus on organizational shortcomings leading up to the games topped off intensive criticism within and outside Russia over the erosion of civil rights occurring in the country. Reports of corruption plaguing the \$55 billion-dollar 'production costs' of the Olympic site added to the uproar with charges of labour abuse and the economic displacement of local residents. The modern Olympics have routinely stood at the centre of political boycotts (Berlin 1936), social protests (Mexico City 1968) and environmental controversies (Athens 2004) since its revival in 1896.<sup>1</sup> Yet the mocking tones flooding Western social media and the tense protests around the Sochi Olympics differed in how geocultural politics remained central to and spilled beyond these games. Hosting these Olympics presented Russian president Vladimir V. Putin with an opportunity to show the vitality of Russia's post-socialist economic and social transformation. However, over the past several years, the Kremlin has curtailed the momentum of democratic restructuring with a campaign to assert a more conservative nationalism as a restoration of the power and influence of 'traditional values' founded in the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>2</sup> The Sochi Olympics spotlighted Russia's surging reform strategy in ways that reinforced and resisted Putin's conservative regime, one that outspoken critics and human rights' activists claimed was set on repressing social dissent across the country.<sup>3</sup>

Dmitry Chernyshenko, president of the Sochi Organizing Committee, praised the 2014 games as showing ‘the new face of Russia to the world’.<sup>4</sup> But what face was that? What many observers may remember of the opening ceremony is the technical failure of one illuminated snowflake that did not open to form the Olympic rings, due to a missed technical cue. Outside Russia, the ring fail became a symbol for the anti-democratic face of abuse, corruption and discrimination gripping the country. Within Russia, the reported forty-three million people watching the televised broadcast of the ceremony by the country’s largest state-controlled television network, Channel One, saw recorded footage of the successful linking rings taken during a dress rehearsal.<sup>5</sup> While external reactions ridiculed this one technical mishap, Russia’s domestic public watched a flawless effect. How do we decipher this new face of Russia? Is there a correlation between the opening ceremony’s Olympic-branded exuberance and the uproar over the Kremlin’s suppression of civil rights? I argue that, in subtle ways, the stagecraft of the opening ceremony intensified the polarizing geocultural politics of these games.

This essay examines the divisive transnational environment – stirred up by the Sochi Winter Olympics – regarding the Kremlin’s increasing conservatism, primarily through the role this Olympic spectacle played in reimagining post-Soviet Russia. Olympic design history is a steadily growing field that complements theatre and performance studies. Jilly Traganou and others who study the symbols, uniforms, graphics, venues, urban planning and ceremonial traditions of Olympic production design bring critical attention to the ‘polyphonic’ functions of design as a formative influence on the sociopolitical contexts and national narratives in which host cities craft the Olympic experience.<sup>6</sup> Alan Tomlinson argues that glocal tensions further problematize Olympic ceremonies when mediated by globalizing processes of exchange: ‘As globalizing processes and regional and cultural traditions meet’, he observes, ‘the local has the capacity to absorb the global in an *arrogating* process of remoulding’.<sup>7</sup> My interest in the composition of the opening ceremony extends beyond the design narrative of the ceremony itself and into its mediating function in the sustained friction flowing into and emanating out of the spectacle. My analysis of the opening programme questions the role that this Olympic spectacle played in departing from the ideological divisions of former Soviet-era geocultural politics and towards assimilating Russian neo-nationalism into the global community. Drawing on textual and visual sources of the ceremonies, I trace this transition by re-examining the Communist world view represented in the opening ceremony of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which occurred at the height of the Cold War. Sochi’s opening ceremony re-envisioned Russian identity as a shared world legacy of modern innovation and achievement. I address how the production design reinvented Russian heritage for transnational appeal through its carefully chosen international creative team.

### **The political climate ahead of the Sochi Olympics**

The use of the Olympic stage by its host nation to revamp its global image is nothing new. Contemporary ceremonies, in particular, frame origin myths that display

progressive transformations of cultural heritage and interconnecting socio-economic development: industrial innovation, natural iconography and artistic traditions, all framed as part of a community of nations.<sup>8</sup> The opening ceremony at Sochi did not deviate far from recent iterations of this standard template; neither did it diffuse the politically charged atmosphere. Rather, the performance was a balancing act. I propose that the Sochi ceremony was the opening scene of a much larger cultural campaign that has since rippled through neo-nationalist movements across Eastern and Western Europe, as well as the United States. Before turning to more detail, allow me to outline some of the social and political changes occurring in Russia leading up to the Sochi opening ceremony.

Alarms raised ahead of the Sochi Olympics escalated international scrutiny of the Putin government's social and economic policies. In 2012, the arrest and imprisonment of the punk-inspired activist collective Pussy Riot helped bring international attention to the suppression of dissident voices within Russia. Their minute-long 'Punk Prayer' performed in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow deliberately challenged Putin's conservative agenda. Three of the band's members – Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Ekaterina Samutsevich – received a two-year prison sentence when found guilty of 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred'.<sup>9</sup> Masha Gessen, a Russian-American journalist, observes in her account of Pussy Riot's arrest and imprisonment that the courts remain 'Russia's sole venue for political conversation'.<sup>10</sup> Under sweeping amnesty legislation that passed parliament only a few weeks prior to the opening of the Olympics, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina found themselves free with less than three months left to serve on their sentences.<sup>11</sup> The group members' sudden release did little to appease the firestorm of criticism abroad over the crackdown on free speech. Calling her release a 'sham', Alyokhina told reporters on her exit from the Siberian prison in the city of Krasnoyarsk, 'I don't think the amnesty was a humanitarian act. I think it was a PR stunt'.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, liberal opposition leader and former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov (one of Putin's strongest critics) pressured the Putin administration on its human rights record. As preparations at the western resort city of Sochi on the coast of the Black Sea proceeded, Nemtsov and activist Leonid Martynyuk published an independent report on the opposition leader's website, detailing government cronyism in the distribution of construction contracts.<sup>13</sup> Their report also revealed civil and economic disenfranchisement that included the forced evictions of Sochi residents to make way for improving city infrastructure and the exploitation of tens of thousands of migrant workers brought in to complete construction of Olympic site venues. Exposure of civil rights abuses continued with the passage of anti-LGBTQ laws in 2013, criminalizing the distribution of 'information about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender relationships to children', resulting in worldwide protests and calls from gay rights activists to boycott the games.<sup>14</sup> Putin's defence of the government's anti-gay stance attacked liberal policies supported by 'other countries' as immoral and undemocratic.<sup>15</sup> This positioning of Russia as a progressive conservative government underlined a reform strategy designed to incite anti-Western liberal sentiments among Russian nationalists and reclaim Russia's post-Soviet status beyond its current

borders. The Sochi Olympics became a lightning rod igniting democratic protests internationally while consolidating Russian national support domestically for Putin's cultural reform programme. The opening ceremony culminated in the context of this sociopolitical maelstrom.

Sochi's opening ceremony attempted to legitimize Putin's conservative new world order. This raises a larger question in terms of how the medium of the Olympic mega-spectacle functions as a transcultural performance system capable of expressing differing governing structures: democratic, conservative or communist, among others. Political scientist Joseph S. Nye calls this form of political diplomacy 'soft power', a term he coined to describe the ways governments influence desired outcomes in international politics. 'Soft power', he writes, 'rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others'.<sup>16</sup> As a public-affairs strategy, soft power resides in the intangible and non-threatening means of attracting others to a tactical agenda. The primary means of influencing perception includes the values an organization or country express in its culture. Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin detail how, in 2013, Russia formally introduced the idea of soft power into its foreign-policy doctrine. They note that the Kremlin's strategy was not a singular cultural-diplomacy tactic as typically practised, but one that combined, if necessary, hard-power tools.<sup>17</sup> Jonathon Grix and Nina Kramareva expand on this construct 'as a part of a wider package of "spatial governance" undertaken by Putin's regime'.<sup>18</sup> Sochi's opening ceremony complicates the use of cultural propaganda to influence global perceptions through expressions of shared beliefs or mass sentiments not only when the context of geopolitical power keeps changing, but also when long-term objectives seek to undercut those transnational values.

Russia's two Olympic appearances are a good example of how the changing context of political objectives deploys soft-power public relations. For contrast, I return briefly to the opening ceremony of the 1980 Summer Olympics. The Moscow games were the first time a Communist nation was chosen to host the Olympics. The USSR seized the opportunity to showcase its political strength and humanize Soviet society through popular representations of its multi-ethnic culture. Sochi's opening ceremony removed the socialist image left by the legacy of Moscow's spectacle; it softened the muscular tactics of Putin's illiberal reforms to promote Russia's achievements and elite artistic traditions as an influential global legacy. Russia's cultural wealth became a large part of the Olympic display. Even the shell-like design of the 40,000-seat Fisht Stadium – named after the mountain peak in the western Caucasus mountains – was meant to resemble a jewelled Fabergé egg.

### **Revising Russia's status on the Olympic stage: from Moscow in 1980 to Sochi in 2014**

Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the USSR, presided over the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics, which were boycotted by the United States in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. His death two years later marked the rapid decline of the USSR. The Soviet Union harnessed the Olympic platform to display a unified national identity

amid a tense Cold War atmosphere of long-standing mutual distrust. Sixty-five nations joined the US-led boycotts; an official of the Italian Olympic Committee, whose team did compete at the games, mused, 'This is a wedding at which the bride appears in a dress of paper, not lace'.<sup>19</sup> The opening ceremony temporarily stemmed the dispirited tide surrounding the event with a buoyant celebration, while affirming Russia's superpower status that eclipsed international tensions. It served the mutual purpose of bolstering 'a stagnant decaying Communist regime' internally, while celebrating a multi-ethnic Soviet culture and heritage on the world stage.<sup>20</sup> In respect to the latter perspective, Xavier Kolas, writing in *El Mundo*, observed that the opening ceremony was designed to convince the world that on the other side of the 'iron curtain the sun shines brighter'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a central metaphor of the ceremony was the sun, composed of 150 standard bearers and 800 gymnasts forming the sun on the field, while youths in the national costumes of the Soviet Union's fifteen republics ran in from all sides of the stadium to animate its rays.<sup>22</sup>

The artistic portion of the programme began after the official protocols of welcoming speeches, the raising of the Olympic flag and the lighting of the Olympic flame. The colourful spectacle wove together a theme of sports and art enhanced by composer Eduard Artemyev's 'Ode to Sport' with words by Pierre de Coubertin – credited as the founder of the modern Olympic movement. The sumptuous visual choreography drew attention to the country's traditions of physical culture and popular art traditions through displays of mass gymnastics, folk dancing and performers outfitted as the bear cub Misha (the cuddly mascot of the games) filling the field. While 100,000 people watched in Lenin Central Stadium in Luzhniki, television networks from fifty-nine countries transmitted the performance.<sup>23</sup>

The pageantry of the artistic segments contained bold imagery without need of translation to worldwide viewers. A novelty in the ceremony prominently featured the Soviet space programme. Two cosmonauts from their orbiting space station appeared on the electronic scoreboard to convey 'Greetings from Space'.<sup>24</sup> One resonant image was the hammer and sickle symbolically configured by performers. The synergy of 16,000 participants – including 'students from all of the Soviet Union's twenty-four colleges of physical education, gymnasts from all sports societies, and professional and amateur performers' – underpinned the official motto 'Sport, Peace, Progress'.<sup>25</sup> Young dancers and brightly attired ethnic dance groups from Siberia, Armenia, Moldova, Lithuania, Belarus, Azerbaijan and Estonia welcomed the assembly with a series of dances, entitled *Friendship of the Peoples*.<sup>26</sup> As a parade of horse-drawn troikas raced around the track, gymnasts and acrobats from Trudovye Reservy Sports Society formed the five interlocking Olympic rings on the field with their bodies stacking four-tier human 'vases' in the centre of each ring. The mass choreography of performers' precision circles, curves and lines on the field played against a backdrop in the eastern stands of the stadium that featured, for the first time, a human 'picture screen'. The visual effect involved 4,500 athletes in colour-coded hats and shirts, who arranged painted panels to create graphic images complementing the performers' pictorial movement.<sup>27</sup> The vibrant mosaics used in both the opening and closing ceremonies included many Russian artisan products and festive symbols: Misha the

bear cub, Russian lace patterns, vivid red and gold *khokhloma* floral patterns and even fireworks.

Philip A. D'Agati argues that the Moscow Olympics decisively demonstrated 'the primacy of the Socialist world over local and state nationalities'.<sup>28</sup> The historian advances the concept of 'periphery dissection' to explain the representational function of including the Soviet republics in the performance.<sup>29</sup> The visual display of Soviet nationalism reflected an integration narrative that legitimized national identity as 'the people', thereby diminishing state ethno-nationalities. The figurative choreography of the Communist states' multi-ethnic folk and sport culture promoted the collective idealism of Soviet life working harmoniously under a centralized political system. However, the tightly orchestrated performance was in keeping with long-held Soviet cultural policies. The Soviet era had transformed the ethno-national identity of Russian peasants and Russian folk culture into cultural workers in order to cultivate patriotism through 'positive images' of the people, according to historian Laura J. Olson.<sup>30</sup> The cultural policy of social realism further filtered ethnic folk culture, diluting local distinctions into popular representations of folk identity and the craft products made by the people. The picturesque version of art and dance in the ceremony may have temporarily shored up patriotic sentiment by disseminating a vision of the warmth and friendship of Communist life to those watching. Five years later, Mikhail Gorbachev would introduce political reform under *perestroika*.

Max Helms, an American tourist in attendance, called the opening ceremony 'one of the most spectacular things I have ever seen', adding 'you can see the Soviet Government takes care of its people'.<sup>31</sup> Yet the success of the production's humanizing objective might lie less in consolidating Soviet authority than in softening Soviet identity to outside observers, accustomed to viewing the socialist country as an evolving threat, with lasting impressions of Russian popular culture: folk dancers circling to the stringed *balalaika*, floral *khokhloma* designs, or dazzling gymnasts on trampolines soaring in the air. Folk entertainment returned in the festive closing ceremony, where large floats depicting *matryoshki*, commonly known as Russian nesting dolls, rolled around the track to the delight of the spectators. Their rosy cheeks, colourful jumpers and headscarves were created to resemble peasant mothers or *babushki*.<sup>32</sup> Only a few of these lasting cultural references turned up at the Sochi Olympics: one such holdover was souvenir *matryoshki* made by women from the town of Semyonov.<sup>33</sup> Although Moscow's exuberant performance established a new standard for future opening ceremonies, it also exported a marketable iconography of popular Russian crafts and festival traditions that mitigated long-standing Western rhetoric channelling the perils of Communism. Sochi would depart from Moscow's multi-ethnic pageant, replacing the ideological markers associated with the Soviet sphere of influence with a more asymmetrical strategy of geocultural impact.

Sochi's central metaphor was 'to say goodbye to the past with a smile'.<sup>34</sup> The opening ceremony broke with the past gingerly, beginning with a video montage of the Cyrillic alphabet associating each letter with a major historical figure or landmark. The video prelude introduced a dreaming girl in bed, who awakens to begin a journey through a historical landscape that thematically unfolds during the live performance.

The show shed Soviet imagery of cheerful *babushki* and daring athletic feats to reflect on a common language shared by the diverse multi-ethnic society, and to look back on a modernizing legacy that made Russia strong, pure and innovative. The spectacle's five sections spanned a thousand years of Russian history: the birth of Russia from mythology to Russian fairytales; medieval Russia; imperial Russia, or the days of the tsars; the twentieth century and the Russian avant-garde, and the future. The medieval section centred on the iconic, multicoloured architectural domes most notable on St Basil's Cathedral, which materialized in the form of boldly coloured balloons held by performers. The towering inflatables were designed to trigger something for the tourists who flock to the famed landmark in Red Square to take photographs, as well as serving as a prideful reminder of traditional values in Russian orthodoxy.

Scenes spread across stage and space. Flying, illuminated objects floated into view, such as the reappearance of a high-tech, sparkling troika from Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*. One scene featured the great reformer, Peter the Great, commanding five ships as a metaphor of military strength and modernization. Bolshoi ballet star Svetlana Zakharova, joined by Ivan Vasiliev and Danila Korsuntsev, danced among waltzing pairs in a ballroom scene from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. A twentieth-century sequence featured three thousand dancers, singers and artists spread across multilevel stages, representing the classical genres of music and ballet in a mash-up of compositions by Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Igor Stravinsky. Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* was performed with dancers costumed in blue LED light strands. The abstract movement evoked an aquatic world of transforming winged flora. Big-name stars from classical music included international opera star Anna Netrebko (who sang the Olympic anthem), and the ceremony's conductor, Valery Gergiev (artistic director of the Mariinsky Theater in St Petersburg and principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra).

The opening ceremony's producer, Konstantin Ernst, referred to the performance as a narration of the history of Russia in modern visual language.<sup>35</sup> Even the staging of the ceremony departed from previous opening programmes. The live production was deliberately designed for television and digital platform viewers rather than the stadium audience, who did not experience the immersive imagery. In fact, Sochi marked a turning point in Olympic Winter Games broadcast; the amount of digital coverage available exceeded that of traditional television broadcasts.<sup>36</sup> A state-of-the-art projection floor – first used at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics – created three-dimensional moving pictures of churning seas and geographical maps on television screens when cameras zoomed in from overhead. An aerial track on the stadium roof pulled more than 980 large illuminated props across the ceiling. Twenty-five lifts and eighteen traps on the stadium floor enabled props and performers to transition between scenes. According to Nadya Nasonovskaya, director of communications, there were 'approximately 25,000 cues during the show'.<sup>37</sup> The Russian Revolution segment skimmed over darker events to re-create the period's avant-garde visual art and theatre. At one point, the stadium turned into a Kazimir Malevich painting where enormous geometric-shaped heads and hands holding a hammer or sickle glided over the field. Artistic innovation was followed by



Soviet-era industrialization symbolized by giant rolling red trackers that reconfigured into muscular, churning machinery.

The design – titled ‘Dreams of Russia’ – closely resembled the grand special effects and fantasy patterns that have developed over the last two decades of Olympic spectacles. For example, the figure of youth often guides Olympic audiences through a transforming dreamscape depicting cultural, social, economic and technological progress. The opening ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics first initiated the realm of the dreamscape with the freckled face of thirteen-year old Nikki Webster – the Aussie dream girl – who portrayed the face of reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Australia and white Australia. Aboriginal singer and performer Djakapurra Munyarryan joined Webster, guiding her into the pre-colonial past, and, by the end, walking hand in hand with her into the future.<sup>38</sup> Sochi revised the dreamscape with eleven-year-old gymnast Elizaveta (Liza) Temnikova, who performed the dream-girl role of Lyuba (meaning ‘love’). In a departure from the reconciliation narrative, Sochi’s youthful icon personified the overarching unifying symbol of the motherland. Her journey through the past and into the future captured a surreal sense of wonder and excitement over the enterprise, strength and beauty of a diverse Russian heritage and of a new cultural origin that shed all signs of multi-ethnic distinction or tradition. At the end, Lyuba releases a red balloon while floating in the air above a large blue globe. The opaque symbolism of the final image signalled a goodbye to Soviet Russia and hinted toward Russia’s resurgent future; it also captured a nostalgic gesture back to the memorable closing ceremonies at the 1980 Moscow Olympics when the mascot Misha turned into a giant puppet, releasing balloons that drifted slowly out of the stadium.

### **The creative industry producing Olympic spectacles**

The producers, directors and artistic teams charged with creating and staging the opening and closing ceremonies lately are increasingly part of an international entertainment landscape. The challenge for those directing and producing Olympic spectacles is finding ways to innovate staging methods towards reaching media-saturated audiences while complying with the governance of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and with the host country’s attempt to boost positive cultural references both domestically and internationally. These creative teams have, for several decades now, come to the Olympic stage from film, television, theatre and live-event or special-event production. Danny Boyle’s experience, for instance, moves through theatre, broadcasting and film prior to producing the whimsical opening ceremony of the 2012 London Summer Olympics.<sup>39</sup> Australian director David Atkins, along with producer Ric Birch, initiated the recent wave of special-event spectacles with their epic extravaganza for the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics. Both Birch and Atkins have established spectacle media companies that specialize in producing live international events as well as offering consultation services for World Cup soccer and Olympic ceremonies, corporate events, fire and light shows, arena spectaculars and theatrical production.<sup>40</sup> Appointed international artistic adviser by the IOC,



Birch had previously served as director of production for the 1984 Los Angeles opening ceremony; he later consulted with Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou on the acclaimed opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics that, like Sochi, rebooted China's global presence. The trajectory of this genre of live-art event design is establishing a specialized global industry of collaborating producers, designers and technicians. Employing cutting-edge technical sophistication, gigantic moving sets and sophisticated lighting systems, the Olympic spectacle is produced to maximize arena staging with three-dimensional panoramic effects to reach beyond the live stage. Sochi's opening ceremony differed little in applying this transnational trend to the Olympic experience. It utilized state-of-the-art technology and a seasoned international team to create the spectacle. Yet the addition of foreigners to the production team, as well as the transcendent production values, irked some domestic critics.

Sochi producer Konstantin Ernst and artistic director Andrei Bultenko have loyal ties to the Putin regime. Ernst has decades of experience as the 'premier visual stylist' of the Putin era, according to journalist Joshua Yaffa. The former television host of the newsmagazine show *Vzglyad* (Viewpoint) has dabbled in producing and directing for television and film but holds immense stature in official culture as director general of Russian public television Channel One.<sup>41</sup> Bultenko directs for Channel One, including directing MTV award programmes in Moscow.<sup>42</sup> They commissioned American-based production designer George Tsy-pin to stage the opening ceremony. He also co-authored the script. Five years earlier, the Chinese government approached Tsy-pin to work on the 2008 Beijing Olympics.<sup>43</sup> He turned the offer down to work on the troubled (and record-breaking) Broadway musical *Spider-Man: Turn off the Dark*. Born in Kazakhstan, Tsy-pin has lived in the United States since 1979, designing for opera, television, film, theatre, exhibitions and concerts.

Work on the show began in Tsy-pin's warehouse studio within 5Pointz, the former graffiti haven in Queens, New York. He enlisted two other creative members from *Spider-Man*: costume designer Kim Barrett and choreographer Daniel Ezralow, who created the dream-like section on twentieth-century Russia. The creative team also included international specialists: two producers had worked on the London Olympics ceremony, three aerialist experts came from Cirque du Soleil and a director of the Shanghai circus choreographed the gymnastics. The special effects were fabricated outside Russia. The flying troika came from Sweden, and mascot puppets were made in Australia. The import of a creative team of foreigners annoyed Russian nationalists, one of whom complained that Putin had contracted out the country's national narrative to a cosmopolitan intellectual elite.<sup>44</sup> Journalist Olga Kabanova drily commented in the business daily *Vedomosti*, 'This has happened throughout Russian history. The main monuments were built by foreigners in accordance with an ideological commission'.<sup>45</sup>

The show's proud national transformation appeared to speak to the uneasy climate in Russia. A fundamental objective in the design, according to Chernyshenko, was to 'unite Russian people' in 'all their magnificent diversity'.<sup>46</sup> Historian Mark Kramer offered his observation that Putin's priorities were in solidifying his political base

domestically.<sup>47</sup> The bold opulence of the spectacle reinforced the country's renewed global power. To the broader audience, the historical narrative recalled Russia's literary, scientific, technical and artistic contributions to the world – positioning Russia's revolutionary and elite artistic traditions on par with Western liberal cultures. Ernst's statements to the press reiterated that it was important to show a new image of Russia that departed from world perceptions of Soviet Communism or Cold War associations.<sup>48</sup> Part of the makeover involved erasing a Communist legacy and overwriting the lingering cultural references from the 1980 Olympics. 'I wanted to break the stereotype of our country', Ernst told a reporter from *The Telegraph*. 'What is Russia for an average person of this world? It is caviar and *matryoshka* dolls, *balalaika* or *ushanka* hats, or even just a bear. These things are all part of us but they are not the whole of us, he remarked'.<sup>49</sup>

While the ceremony appealed to a restorative outlook towards rebuilding national pride, opinions of commentators over that new image differed widely and across the political spectrum. Some pointed out the hypocrisy of inviting the faux lesbian duo t.A.T.u. to perform during the pre-ceremony.<sup>50</sup> Russian Nationalists complained of watering down the country's military history to foreground idealist and sentimentalized nostalgia. A Second World War theme depicting a Soviet soldier liberating the world from German fascism in the original script of the show was cut at the insistence of the IOC, who has final approval over the scenario and who considered the segment too political.<sup>51</sup> When details emerged of the omission in the *Moscow Times*, speculation questioned whether the foreigners in charge of the show were catering to foreign tastes or whether Putin opted to soften international opposition by foregrounding (European) humanism.<sup>52</sup> The criticisms surrounding the ceremony itself convey residual suspicions founded in Cold War attitudes and biases within Russia and from the West. A recent study of the international media narratives of the Sochi Olympics reported by BBC World News and Russia Today (RT) demonstrates the conflicted global discourse these games generated in the media landscape.<sup>53</sup> Where Russian media claimed a jubilant return to the world stage, foreign media sustained the controversies over corruption and human rights violations.<sup>54</sup> These fractured perspectives further amplified the international public outcry over the Kremlin's policy actions throughout and following the Olympics.

### **Soft power and geocultural politics**

Olympic cultural discourse is a powerful platform to direct public perceptions away from domestic realities or international conflicts, particularly through the upbeat, celebratory formula of the opening ceremony. Hosting the games also provides an opportunity to shore up patriotism, world stature, or regime stability, all of which were goals of the Moscow Olympics. Anna Alekseyeva argues that Sochi's softer image and branding of Russia yielded a degree of acceptance by the Russian population even though a large portion of the international community voiced rejection of this attempted rebrand.<sup>55</sup> Arguably, there is another way of assessing the goals and outcomes of Sochi: that the performance was part of a more expansive cultural campaign, one that not only was

about celebrating a national reawakening, but also underpinned the Putin regime's long-term goals advancing a political and cultural strategy to reshape the geopolitical balance of power. In the context of a splintering geocultural arena, Sochi's opening ceremony underscored a transformative moment for the Kremlin to globalize Russia's cultural reform momentum.

Sochi generated so much outrage over civil and human rights abuses occurring within Russia that IOC president Thomas Bach addressed the public controversy in his opening remarks: 'Yes, it is possible, even as competitors, to live together under one roof in harmony, with tolerance and without any form of discrimination for whatever reason'.<sup>56</sup> It was a rare moment, since the IOC strives to ensure that the games remain politically neutral. Yet politics remained central to these Olympics. Western leaders were noticeably absent at the opening ceremony. Former US president Barack Obama, then UK prime minister David Cameron and German chancellor Angela Merkel all abstained from attending, creating the optics of a formal protest by the United States and two members of the EU alliance. Chinese president Xi Jinping did attend in support of developing Russia–China strategic relations. For the first time, the Chinese head of state travelled outside China to attend a major international sport competition.<sup>57</sup>

During the Sochi games, Pussy Riot's public appearance resulted in arrest and detention. On 20 February 2014, they released a clip of a new song, 'Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland'.<sup>58</sup> The video depicted scenes of band members and activists being pepper-sprayed and violently attacked by Cossacks, paramilitary separatists from Russia who have resurfaced as security units. Within a month of the conclusion to the Sochi Olympics, Russia annexed the Crimea peninsula from Ukraine; this initiated what experts consider a new Cold War crisis among the United States and Western NATO allies.<sup>59</sup> In the wake of the crisis in Ukraine, Ernst's dismissal as head of Channel One coincided with the repression of press freedom in Russia. Criticism over mistakes in the opening ceremony, especially the failure of the Olympic ring to open, fell on him. At a press conference following the end of the Sochi games, Ernst laughed off the technical mishap when asked about it, adding that the creative team turned the glitch into a humorous bit in the closing ceremony.<sup>60</sup> Not only did the press and journalists suffer in the aftermath of Sochi, but the escalating climate of fear, intimidation and violence deepened after the assassination of the high-profile political opposition leader Boris Nemtsov on the street in central Moscow in March 2015.<sup>61</sup>

Most recently, remarks by then Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov at the Primakov Readings International Forum in Moscow illuminated the strategy behind the Kremlin's broader objectives. He called for a 'polycentric new world order' that would shift international relations and realign the global balance of power. The tactical aim is to dismantle the Cold War paradigm, particularly the liberal 'West-centric' model of globalization. Dislodging Western countries' economic network is one factor driving this foreign policy. Strengthening the 'cultural civilization identity in the modern world' is another, which suggests that the Russian government is promoting a multifaceted global plan towards advancing a conservative

cultural movement.<sup>62</sup> The argument frames aspirational democratic principles, such as freedom and equality, in order to undermine those very principles.

These ideas have echoed in the growing divisions felt in the rise of neo-nationalist and alt-right movements in Western Europe and the United States that are threatening open borders, press freedoms and civil liberties in democratic societies. Russian interference in the 2016 Holland and US elections, as well as the 2017 French election, aided far-right candidates by using ‘information warfare’ aimed at public consumption. In effect, Russia’s main external intelligence agency, the SVR, which focuses on civilian affairs, has increasingly focused on weaponizing culture.<sup>63</sup> These psychological operations (or psy-ops) have developed cyber-tactics to distribute Russian propaganda through news media, social media and Internet bots. This type of cyberwarfare targets mass communication in order to ‘influence, confuse, and demoralize its intended audience, often containing a mixture of true and false information to seem plausible and fit into the preexisting worldview of the intended audience’.<sup>64</sup> The result generates chaos and social divisions. Russia deployed what are called ‘active measures’ in the UK’s Brexit campaign. These measures were also used by Russia in the US presidential election to discredit Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and aid Republican candidate Donald J. Trump, which influenced Trump’s win. Since then President Trump’s neo-nationalist agenda has caused domestic upheaval and destabilized long-standing global alliances such as NATO, raising questions over his administration’s uncritical stance towards Russia. The efficacy of such intelligence operations suggests a recalibration of the uses of soft power as a methodology of asymmetric cultural influence that raises new questions concerning how the role of transnational forms of mass performance such as the Olympics are susceptible to the politics of weaponizing geocultural ideology.

Thinking of Sochi’s legacy in terms of the geocultural formation of white Christian neo-nationalist movements, the Olympics provided Putin with a public-relations offensive to exploit existing social fissures whilst hoisting Russia into the spotlight as a multipolar global power following Russian’s post-Soviet weakened status. Sochi’s dreamscape modelled an aspirational mythology of Russia’s push for reforming the contours of global community. The symbolic history of the motherland masked the illiberal shift in Putin’s new brand of conservative nationalism. However, public debate surrounding the event assimilated neo-nationalism into the global discourse. The noticeable disjunction – between Putin’s hard-power tactics on the domestic and international political fronts, and his soft-power diplomacy on the world stage – suggest a multipronged approach to the Kremlin’s influence campaign. Since 2012, his cultural policy has attempted to cultivate a more Western-friendly face.<sup>65</sup> Segunin and Karabeshkin observe that the Kremlin’s new foreign-policy philosophy uses soft power to ‘downplay Russia’s image of an “aggressive” and “undemocratic” country’ in order to attract international partners.<sup>66</sup> ‘The promotion of Russia’s positive image abroad’, the foreign-policy experts continue, ‘is considered to be an important priority in its soft power strategy’. One way of accomplishing this goal is through influencing public opinion, as well as disseminating Russia’s language and culture internationally.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

The opening ceremony of the Moscow Olympics enacted a warm and fuzzy popular narrative of the Soviet sphere, displaying Communist society as an integration of its powerful status. Sochi's opening ceremony elided any trace of Russia's multi-ethnic heritage, and instead seized the Olympic platform to stoke pride within the country and retool foreign perceptions with a beguiling history of Russia's social, economic and artistic achievements. Aided by Tsypin's Broadway styling, the spectacle exported a competing progress narrative of tradition and cultural prosperity that coopted democratic sentiments of shared community and common values. Underneath the dancing and floating sets, an unsettled image of Russia emerged in the promise of the young Lyuba, waking up to the rebirth of her nation. Olympic ceremonies are transient, ephemeral events, designed to reaffirm hope and inspiration. Sochi's opening ceremony had difficulty sustaining the transitory splendour of the ideals when confronted with the face of real-time social crisis. It marks a pivot in the use of soft-power valuations to inflect geocultural spaces with a contested politics of conservative reform.

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