

1.11 Image-laundering by countries through sports

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Fifty years ago this summer, from the sidelines at Wembley, the so-called 'Russian linesman' flagged for England's controversial third World Cup final goal against West Germany, helping to drive Bobby Moore's team to a 4–2 victory and, to date, England's only World Cup win.²

The linesman's name was Tofiq Bahramov, and he wasn't actually from Russia but Azerbaijan, and – until recently – that country's only real sporting claim to fame.³ That all changed in the summer of 2015, however, when Baku hosted the first ever European Games, an event devised by the European Olympic Committees (EOC) as a continent-wide sporting extravaganza to rival the Asian and Pan-American Games, with some 6,000 athletes from 50 countries taking part in 20 sports.

Those already having heard of the event are unlikely to have done so for the sport. It's far more likely to have been for things that Azerbaijan's government would have much preferred the public did not know, such as the systematic dismantling of civil society in the run-up to the Games, which saw journalists, lawyers, opposition politicians and youth activists intimidated, harassed, arrested and locked up on trumped-up charges.⁴ There are at least 20 people designated as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International in Azerbaijan, jailed simply for criticising or challenging the government, and there could be up to 100 political prisoners.⁵

Azerbaijan, as described below, is one of various examples of image-laundering by countries or heads of state through sports, in order to attract positive attention from both the global community and at home, and often to divert concerns over serious allegations of corruption and human rights. Such strategies are made worse when leaders or administrations, for private or undue interests, garner this attention through

sport by the use of massive amounts of public funds that could otherwise be used for far better purposes in the interest of their citizens.

Image-laundering and human rights concerns in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan wanted to use the European Games, and the international media attention it hoped they would bring, to convince the world that it is a modern, dynamic, progressive country. This image-laundering exercise turned into a disaster, however, when the world cottoned on to the human rights abuses going on behind the glitz and glamour of the event. The government then did itself no favours by banning Amnesty International from entering the country to launch a new report on the crackdown the day before the opening ceremony.⁶ Then, as if it did not realise that this had attracted enough of the wrong kind of attention, it blocked journalists from *The Guardian*, Radio France International and Germany's ARD channel from covering the event.⁷

The European Games are not the only sporting pie into which Azerbaijan has stuck its fingers. Baku will host Formula 1 in 2016, as well as three group stage games and one quarter-final in the European Football Championships in 2020.⁸ The country has bid twice for the Olympics, and may well have its eye on the event for 2024.⁹

To avoid a repeat of the PR catastrophe of the European Games when these other events come to town, the Azerbaijani government will need to make some urgent improvements to the country's human rights record. It could start by freeing all those who have been wrongly jailed, such as Intigam Aliyev, a prominent human rights lawyer who was sentenced to a seven-and-a-half-year jail term in April 2015 on trumped-up charges of tax evasion, illegal business dealings and abuse of power, after he had successfully taken a number of cases against the Azerbaijani government to the European Court of Human Rights.¹⁰

Another example is Rasul Jafarov, the head of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called the Human Rights Club, sentenced to six and a half years on similar charges, also in April 2015. He had organised the Sing for Democracy campaign when the Eurovision Song Contest was held in Baku in 2012, and had been planning to launch a Sport for Rights campaign around the European Games.¹¹

Then there is Khadija Ismayilova, an award-winning journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, who had been investigating claims of corruption at the highest levels of government when she was arrested in December 2014.¹² She was accused of ‘inciting a colleague to suicide’, and other false charges.¹³ The colleague later said that he had been forced to file the complaint and that his suicide attempt was nothing to do with her.¹⁴ Ismayilova has been harassed by the authorities over many years, and if she is found guilty of the charges currently against her, she could be sentenced to 12 years in prison.¹⁵

Olympic Games are supposed to embrace the concepts of peace, respect and mutual understanding.¹⁶ It is hard to see how these ideals could ever have been honoured in a country with an already repressive regime that escalated its human rights crackdown in the run-up to an Olympic event. Despite this, few in the Olympic movement spoke out. Amnesty International heard nothing from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), nothing from the EOC and nothing from the vast majority of national Olympic Committees that had sent teams to compete. Only the German and Swedish Olympic Committees raised their concerns publicly.¹⁷

Image-laundering is not limited to mega-events but applies more broadly in sports as well, as reflected on the shirts of Atlético Madrid players, which for the last three seasons had ‘Azerbaijan, Land of Fire’, emblazoned across the front (the slogan changed to “Baku 2015” as the Games approached), and on the

club's website, which features promotional materials on tourism and business opportunities in the country.¹⁸

Azerbaijan, however, is not the only country with a poor human rights record guilty of using sport - and in particular mega events - for political gain. A pattern is starting to emerge of these being awarded to countries with money to burn and images to burnish, either as a way of attracting outside investment or consolidating power at home.

Further concerns of image-laundering and human rights: Brazil, Russia and Qatar

In the run-up to the 2014 men's football World Cup in Brazil, a powerful campaign got under way, highlighting the lack of government investment in public transport, schools and hospitals against the spending on the World Cup. The police response to the street protests was brutal, however.

Policemen fired rubber bullets and tear gas and beat protesters with hand-held batons.¹⁹ There have also been forced evictions of whole communities to make way for infrastructure for the World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.²⁰ This means that thousands have been turfed out of their homes, often violently, and not offered adequate alternative accommodation.²¹ If they are offered anything at all, it tends to be miles away from their schools, work, family and friends.²²

Meanwhile, the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 exposed Russia's appalling record on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, environmental protection and freedom of expression. These issues will again come to the fore, no doubt, when the country hosts the 2018 World Cup. In 2015, in a move that Amnesty International described as the latest in an unprecedented crackdown on NGOs, the Russian government introduced a new law banning foreign organisations deemed to be undermining 'state security', 'national defence' or 'constitutional order'.²³ It will also punish Russian activists and civil society groups for maintaining ties with 'undesirable' organisations.²⁴

In the Middle East, Qatar is building for the 2022 World Cup. Those doing the actual building – migrant workers, mostly from India and Nepal – are being subjected to horrendous working conditions, however, including having their wages withheld and being prevented from leaving the country without permission from their employer.²⁵ A recent Amnesty International analysis of progress made on improving migrant workers' rights since the Qatari government promised a number of reforms in 2014 showed not only that the government's pledges had offered too little in the first place, but that it had delivered even less.²⁶ To complete the picture there is the choice the IOC faces in July 2015, when it announces the winning bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics. At the time of writing, Lviv in Ukraine, Krakow in Poland and Stockholm in Sweden had dropped out of the race, leaving only Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Beijing, China, in the running, both of which have unenviable human rights records.²⁷

The need for reform: actions from international sports governing bodies

For too long, sports governing bodies have buried their heads in the sand regarding their responsibility to ensure that their events do not lead to, or exacerbate, human rights abuses. Improvements to bidding criteria are key to turning around this sorry state of affairs, but they must be more than a tick-box exercise. This means that human rights need to be central to the whole process of hosting an event, from initial bids to delivery to evaluation and legacy, and awarding bodies need to make a solid assessment of whether a country or city can and will comply with any promises made on paper.

In December 2014 the IOC approved Agenda 2020, which provides new standards for Olympic events, including clauses on labour rights and respect for LGBT rights, as well as a requirement for host cities to use existing sports infrastructure in order to keep costs down.²⁸ If they are implemented effectively, these reforms could go some way to prevent governments from using sports mega-events as a vehicle for laundering their images for undue interests. The almost

complete silence of the Olympic movement over the European Games perhaps indicates that the spirit of Agenda 2020 is far from being wholly embraced, however. The key test of the IOC's commitment to change will be the 2024 Summer Olympics, from when Agenda 2020 applies, and applications to bid close in September 2015.

FIFA, for its part, has promised revised bidding criteria for the hosting of World Cups, but has yet to provide detail on what they will contain. What is clear, though, is that human rights need to be at the heart of all stages of the hosting process, and, when abuses happen, those responsible for upholding these values and ensuring that promises are kept must hold host governments to account. If they don't, major sports events will continue to leave large-scale despair in their wake.

Box 1.3 France, Qatar and the purchase of Paris Saint-Germain

Kelly McCarthy²⁹

Image-laundering is a clear example of the undue influence of politics in sport. The circumstances that saw the overlap of the Qatari purchase of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) football club and the French support for the Qatar 2022 World Cup bid raise similar concerns for undue political influence in sport.

In November 2010, one month before the Executive Committee of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) voted on the host countries for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, then President of France and PSG supporter Nicolas Sarkozy reportedly hosted a lunch in the Élysée Palace attended by Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Crown Prince of Qatar, Sebastien Bazin, the European representative of PSG's then 95 per cent majority owners Colony Capital,³⁰ and the President of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), Michel Platini, who was also one of 22 FIFA Executive Committee members empowered with a vote for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup bids.³¹

Sarkozy is reported to have encouraged the purchase of the club by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), a state-owned entity of the Qatari government, which was then in the process of bidding to host the 2022 event.³² Also reportedly part of the three-pronged deal, in addition to the PSG purchase and the World Cup vote, was the opportunity for the Qatari state-owned Al Jazeera network to buy a stake in the broadcast rights of France's Ligue 1.³³ Platini, also in attendance at the November 2011 lunch meeting, was allegedly encouraged by the president to vote for the Qatari bid.³⁴ Indeed, referring to the then French and German presidents, FIFA President Sepp Blatter stated in July 2015 that 'Messrs Sarkozy and Wulff tried to influence their vote-makers ... That is the reason why we now have a World Cup in Qatar.'³⁵

Platini did ultimately cast his vote for the successful Qatar 2022 World Cup bid.³⁶ Six months later, in May 2011, QSI purchased 70 per cent of PSG.³⁷ The details of the sale were not made public, but the amount is understood to have been between €30 million (US\$43 million) and €40 million (US\$58 million).³⁸ Three weeks after QSI's purchase of the club, Al Jazeera bought the rights to broadcast France Ligue 1, Ligue 2, Coupe de la Ligue and Trophée des Champions matches internationally, for €192 million (US\$274 million) a year from 2012 to 2016, and thus gaining an interest in promoting French football as widely as possible.³⁹ Al Jazeera also purchased the rights to broadcast a portion of Ligue 1 matches within France, for €90 million (US\$129 million) a year, also from 2012 to 2016, which came at a time when it was thought that Ligue 1 TV revenues were on the verge of declining.⁴⁰ The Chairman of QSI is also the President of PSG as well as the General Manager of Al Jazeera Sport.⁴¹ Platini has maintained that his vote for the Qatari World Cup bid was not linked to any political pressure.⁴² Soon afterwards, in early 2012, Platini's son became the Chief Executive at Burrda, a QSI subsidiary,⁴³ and in January 2015 he became a legal adviser for QSI's European operations.⁴⁴

QSI ultimately purchased the remaining 30 per cent of PSG in March 2012, for an amount understood to have been about €30 million (US\$43 million).⁴⁵ QSI has spent £300 million (US\$470 million) on player transfers since its 2011 purchase of the club, thus helping propel the team to the top of the Ligue 1 standings.⁴⁶ Since the takeover, PSG has gone from a fourth place finish in Ligue 1 in the 2010–2011 season to winning its third consecutive league title in May 2015.

Notes

¹ Naomi Westland is Media Manager at Amnesty International UK, covering issues of sport and human rights, Europe, Latin America, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues and refugees.

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