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Master of Arts of International Relations



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What role did negative media narratives play in the impact  
Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup had on the  
country's soft power?

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## **Abstract**

Soft power has become increasingly important for emerging states to establish themselves on the global landscape. Sports mega events present the perfect opportunity to do so in allowing the host country to engage in nation-branding and image promotion. Academic literature suggests that hosting a sports mega event contributes extensively to the host country's soft power. With an unfavorable international reputation, Russia recognized the necessity to improve on its soft power and hosted the 2018 FIFA World Cup. However, Russia's soft power remained seemingly unchanged despite the expected soft power impact of hosting a sports mega event. Academic literature fails to account for the crucial role of the media in determining the success of a sports mega event in combination with the fragile nature of soft power. This thesis argues that negative media narratives resulted in Russia's inability to increase its soft power despite hosting a sports mega event, and, thereby, that the role of the media has been largely neglected in sports mega event discourse. Negative effects of sports mega events are identified, and corresponding keywords are applied in a qualitative content analysis to analyze negative media narratives in newspaper articles. Subsequently, it is explained what role the media played in the impact Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup had on the country's soft power based on narratives of corruption and human rights violations as well as Russia's projection as international 'bad guy'.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Russia, Sports Mega Events and Soft Power**

Russia's reputation has been deteriorating over the last decades due to their international image as global 'bad guy'. The end of the Cold War and the following years have not been beneficial for Russia's image in the international landscape. Questionable military interventions in Georgia and Syria, the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea, and homophobic legislative decisions are all indicative of where Russia's international standing. It can only be expected of Russia to realize the necessity to change their flawed image and improve their reputation. One of the most useful tools to do so is soft power (Nye 2004; Wang 2006). In its original meaning, soft power refers to the ability and capacity to make others want what you want purely by attracting and persuading the other. Soft power has received increasing attention in international politics and the field of International Relations due to its crucial role in nation building as well as nation branding, shaping public opinion, public diplomacy, culture, or political values among other spheres of influence.

In this respect, Russia has been grouped within the so-called BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). Mostly, this is due to their categorization as emerging or re-emerging states that display similar economic, political and transitional characteristics. The BRICS countries are said to having shown significant economic growth during the last decades, but their soft power capabilities fail to be definitive enough which partly explains their "struggle to rival established Western powers in most of the concept's dimensions" (Stuenkel 2016, 353). To advance their soft powers, it has become a trend among BRICS countries to host sports mega events (Li and Marsh 2016). At sports mega events, participating countries not only compete on an athletic level but also on an ideological level. During the event, sporting success is seen as equivalent to political and ideological success. From a spectator point of view, sports and politics become the same and therefore the race on the pitch or the track is decisive for who wins the political and ideological race.

Arguably, the pinnacle of sports mega events is the FIFA World Cup of football. The FIFA World Cup has been mesmerizing the masses ever since its creation. Every four years one country gets to host the biggest sports event there is. Every four years the world becomes seemingly one through football. National football teams compete against each other over the

span of June and July to find out who is the best and crown the world champion in the end. Fans cheer passionately for their team while collectively setting differences aside and become ever closer. For most, this is what the FIFA World Cup is about: football. However, the FIFA World Cup and so-called sports mega events are not just that but entail much more than meets the eye for a casual spectator. Sports mega events present itself as revenue generator and an instrument of soft power to the host country. This is why their hosting is so sought-after in the international landscape. From an economic standpoint, sports mega events are supposed to attract investment and stimulate tourism. Though, the more tempting effect of sports mega events is the aforementioned soft power effect on the host nation. States use public diplomacy to communicate and promote their soft power to stimulate public relations (Nye 2008). Thus, host countries use sports mega events to increase their soft power. In the context of sports mega events, soft power relates to the projection of a positive image of the host country to ultimately boost their international reputation and promote their respective image to other countries. Starting at the bidding for the hosting, applying countries promote their idea of the ideal World Cup in the form of campaigns that engage with positive mottos such as inclusivity and hospitality. Countries advertise domestic values and emphasize specific characteristics that make the respective country stand out during the bidding war. Already then, countries engage in nation branding, image bolstering, and general country-related positivity that are all characteristic of soft power. The 2018 FIFA World Cup was supposed to be exactly that for host country Russia: an international image boost.

## **1.2 Research Problem and Question**

Due to the magnitude of sports mega events and worldwide spectatorship, the global success of sports mega events is arguably dependent on media broadcasting and the narratives that the media connects to the event and its host. In the age of mass media, sports mega events have a wider reach than ever before which makes the impulse for any country to host a sports mega event impossible to ignore, especially when considering that “the contemporary media-sports complex [provides] unmatched opportunities for global visibility and exposure” (Black 2007, 264). Therefore, mass media is of great importance for the host nation because “along with the sports events themselves, a variety of social and cultural activities supporting the events offer powerful opportunities to promote the host country’s culture and traditions” (Kim and Morrison 2005, 233). For the purpose of spectatorship, the media intentionally exaggerates social

discrepancies and concerns of and within the host nation while seemingly downplaying or disregarding others (Horne 2017). In other words, the media is essential to how the event and the host are projected externally and internally (Fletcher and Dashper 2013). The media reports selectively to their viewership and is subsequently shaping significantly the image of the event and the host. In doing so, the media has the capability to decisively influence whether the event is seen as a success by politics and the public. This holds specific value for foreign reporting as “favorable foreign media coverage can facilitate their foreign policy success” (Szostek 2014, 463). In other words, a sports mega event and its legacy rise and fall with their perception through the media. This ultimately determines the impact a sports mega event has on the host’s soft power.

Newspaper headlines like “The World Cup helped Russia put on its best face – and the world smiled back” (Cawthorne 2018a), “World Cup has improved Russia’s image worldwide” (Vanyina 2018), and “The World Cup is Russia’s latest makeover attempt” (Calamur 2018) imply that Russia’s endeavor to change its reputation for the better was successful. However, according to the annual Soft Power 30 report (McClory 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) Russia remains last placed of the 30 measured countries. Despite hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Russia failed to increase its soft power. Certainly, the necessity to improve its reputation was more than evident but the seemingly infallible soft power benefits that sports mega events are said to procure simply failed to materialize. This is contrary to what academic literature on sports mega events and their soft power effect would anticipate since most highlight the beneficial nature of sports mega events for a country’s soft power to the extent that negative effects are generally unaccounted for (Pillay and Bass 2008; Dashper et al. 2014; Theodoraki 2016) which will be further explained in section 2.2.3 *Criticism and negative effects*. But the success of a sports mega event and its impact on the host’s soft power are not only dependent on the extent of its negative effects but more so on how these are narrated and presented by the media.

As can be seen, academic literature suggests that hosting a sports mega event should contribute largely to the host country’s soft power. In the case of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, this failed to happen, and Russia’s soft power remained seemingly unchanged. In regard to the neglect of the role of the media in sports mega events and their soft power impact displayed in academic literature, this thesis argues that the lacking impact from the hosting of the 2018 FIFA World

Cup on Russia's soft power is strongly linked to the negative narratives with whom the media portrayed host Russia and its event and asks the inevitable research question:

*What role did negative media narratives play in the impact Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup had on the country's soft power?*

This thesis contributes the missing academic link between the impact of a sports mega event on its host's soft power and the role of the media to the academic discourse on sports mega events. In doing so, this thesis also explores the fragile and subjective nature of soft power. Furthermore, it adds to the examination of negative effects of sports mega events in general.

### **1.3 Methodology**

Soft power remains largely a rather difficult-to-measure concept and previous literature on soft power and sports mega events have failed to include the media as focal point of analysis. Therefore, this thesis will use a media analysis in the form of a qualitative content analysis. Newspaper articles about the 2018 FIFA World Cup will be analyzed on the basis of keywords identified through the literature review. A content analysis will categorize results into media narratives. In the following, the qualitative content analysis will analyze media narratives of the 2018 FIFA World Cup by examining Russia's image as portrayed through the media. The entire methodology will be explained in further detail in Chapter 3.

### **1.4 Chapter Outline**

The following thesis will be structured as follows. In Chapter 2, academic literature will be revised on the grounds of soft power, sports mega events, and media diplomacy. More specifically, soft power will be introduced as the foundational concept of this thesis. Continuing, sports mega events will be examined along their impact dimension, the legacy they leave behind, and their relationship to soft power. Chapter 3 constitutes the methodology of this thesis where the rationale behind the choice to opt for a qualitative content analysis will be elaborated on. Furthermore, used concepts and the corresponding operationalization will be explained. Chapter 4 demonstrates Russia's particular case in terms of its soft power, re-branding efforts and the role of sports mega events for Russia. Chapter 5 identifies media

narratives that will subsequently be analyzed to determine how these narratives ultimately failed Russia's attempt to increase its soft power by hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup. This thesis will be concluded in Chapter 6 followed by recommendation for future research in Chapter 7.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review introduces soft power as the fundamental concept to this thesis followed by an introduction to sports mega events as an instrument to enhance the host's soft power. In order to understand sports mega events better, their possible impact is highlighted. The impact of a sports mega event ranges from an improvement of domestic infrastructure over an increase in investment to affecting the host's soft power. Moreover, the legacy ultimately determines the perceived success of a sports mega event. Clearly, the effects of sports mega events are not exclusively positive as projected by most literature. Thus, criticism of sports mega event discourse and the actual negative effects of sports mega events are discussed to build a basis for the final analysis. Closely linked to the negative effects of sports mega events is the role of the media and how it shapes the opinion of the public. Eventually, it is the media that is a crucial factor in how effective a sports mega event is to the host's soft power.

### 2.1 Soft Power

Soft power refers to the exertion of power through indirectly shaping others' preferences by cultural means, identity and value politics, and international relations. The term has been coined by Joseph Nye (1990) and introduced to show different kinds of power. While soft power operates on a rather indirect, subtle, discrete level, hard power manifests itself in the use of military and economic means to coerce political actors into changing behavior to the interest of the political actor acting out said hard power. Soft power characteristics have been summarized best as "the ability to shape the preferences of others, [and] to attract [leading] to acquiescence [as well as] to get others to want the outcome you want because of your cultural or ideological appeal" which means "a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries –admiring values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness –want to follow it" as well as describing soft power as "a key element of leadership" in the sense of "[getting] others to want what you want, to frame the issues, to set the agenda" (Fan 2008, 1).

Recent years have shown that Nye's concept of soft power has risen in attention as well as significance as it is more frequently used to "help explain why states [...] are paying greater attention towards acquiring various forms of cultural and political attraction" (Grix and

Brannagan 2016, 251). Unfortunately, soft power is rather difficult to measure. As previously mentioned, soft power is handled more as a concept itself instead of being conceptualized to the core. The simplified definition of soft power to make others want what you want basically without them knowing is arguably subjective to a certain degree. Soft power effects can impact various parties differently. This can depend on the differences in values, attitudes, cultures or behaviors between the parties that are exposed to another party's soft power. McClory (2019) claims the inherently subjective nature of soft power presents itself as one of the biggest challenges when attempting to accurately measuring it. McClory has developed a sophisticated measure of soft power in his annual Soft Power 30 report since 2015. Against typical scientific research fashion, he [embraces soft power's [subjectivity...]] rather than [attempting] to design against [it]" (McClory 2019, 28). The Soft Power 30 report established a single score index that comprises a combination of objective sub-indices and polling data. Both data sets have several dimensions that are measured individually as well as weighted differently. The topics of the objective sub-indices are government, digital, culture, enterprise, engagement and education (Figure 1).

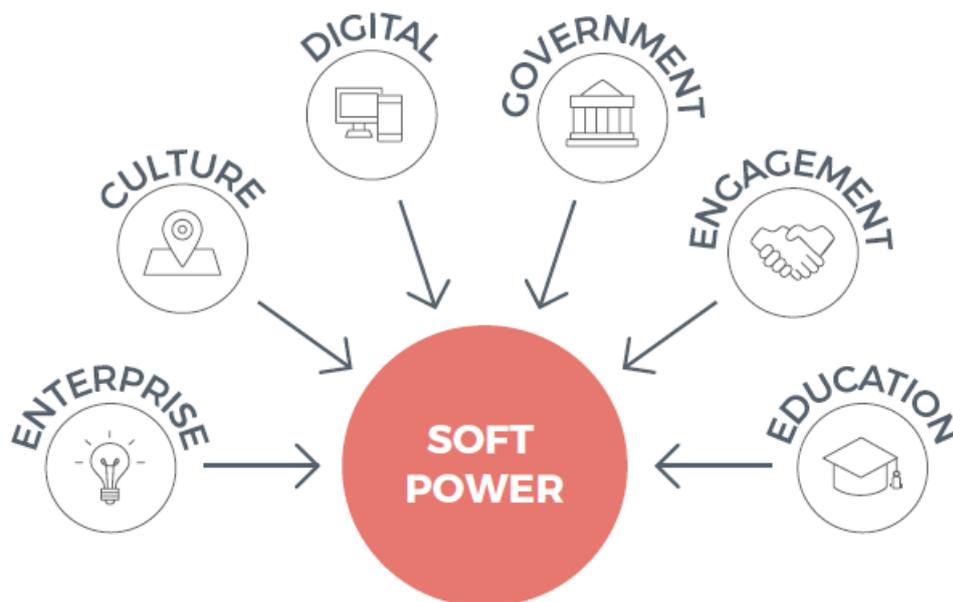


Figure 1 Soft Power Dimensions (McClory 2019)

Grix and Brannagan's soft power package provides an alternative to McClory's soft power dimensions. Similar to McClory, Grix offers five dimensions to the concept of soft power. However, Grix and Brannagan (2016) choose for different dimensions: culture, tourism,

branding, diplomacy and trade (Figure 2). Furthermore, Grix and Brannagan’s individual soft power dimensions have different aspects to them as well. While the model of McClory only shows the dimensions and indicates that they contribute to the total soft power, Grix and Brannagan’s model emphasizes the interplay of soft power dimensions and therefore highlights the important fact that soft power is not just the sum of its dimensions but they can intervene with and influence each other. This conceptualization provides a detailed overview as to what each soft power dimension entails. Most notably, Grix and Brannagan (2016) visualized the interconnectedness of and interplay between the soft power dimensions. It is important to emphasize that the dimensions are not separate from one another where their sum makes up the total of soft power. Soft power dimensions can influence each other and are therefore not mutually exclusive. In other words, an increase in one dimension can lead to a spillover to other dimensions.

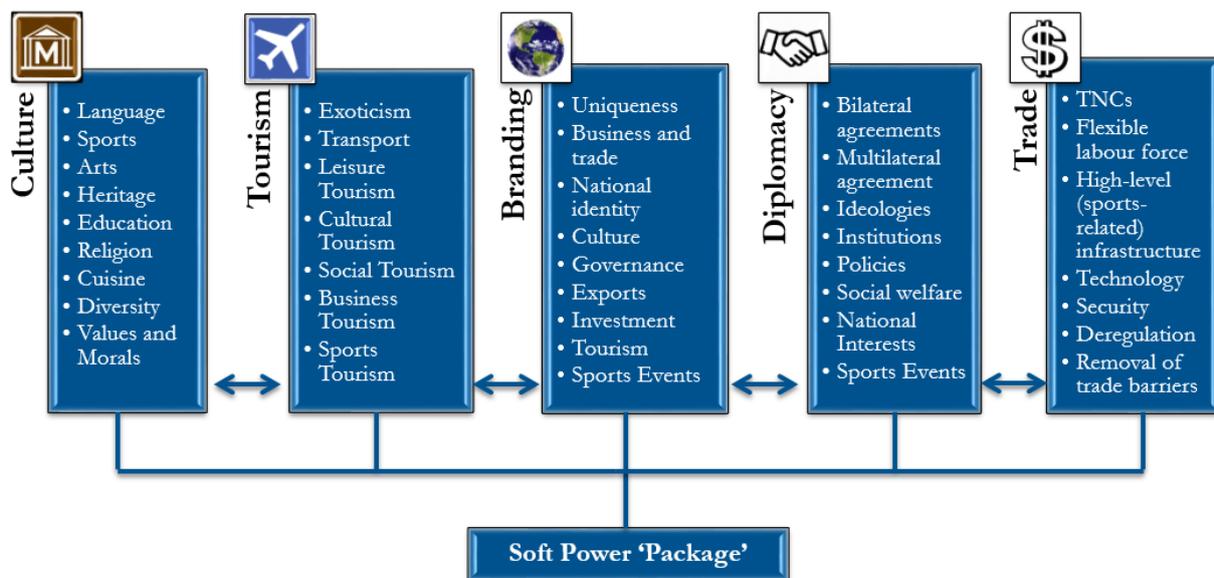


Figure 2 Soft Power 'Package' (Grix and Brannagan 2016)

## 2.2 Sports Mega Events

Although there has not been an explicit or universal definition of a mega event, the following definition has been observed to be the most used yet:

“Mega events are large-scale, cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance. They are typically organized by variable combinations of national governmental and international non-governmental organizations and thus can be said to be important elements in ‘official’ versions of public culture” (Roche 1994, 1).

Later, Roche (2000, 1) also includes the “international significance” of sports mega events emphasizing their magnitude and thus further distinguishing sports mega events from mere sports events. Hall (2006, 59) describes sports mega events rather philosophically as “hallmarks of modernity” that successfully integrate both industrial and corporate interests. Hayes and Karamichas (2012, 2) claim sports mega events are more than meets the eye on a superficial sports and cultural basis due to their “projection of symbolic meanings” in regard to identity promotion and image branding. It is to say that sports mega events are not a common occurrence for a country or a city (Fourie and Santana-Gallego 2011) which only increases “the willingness of governments of all political hues to stage sports mega-events” (Grix 2012, 289).

Sports mega events provide the host with a variety of opportunities. They are said to bring about “economic returns and intangible benefits” (Fourie and Santana-Gallego 2011, 1365). Economic returns range from attracting investment over building tourism to an improvement of infrastructure and commercial potential while intangible or soft power benefits range from location and name branding over community identification to the unification of domestic opposites. The economic benefits of sports mega events have been largely explored in academic literature. Intangible, soft power benefits have been increasing in academic significance in sports mega event discourse. And with them, negative costs of sports mega events have been increasingly highlighted as well.

In recent history of sports mega events, more and more events take place in emerging countries. Examples of sports mega events hosted by emerging countries can be seen in Table 1. Clearly, host nations have to undergo a certain application procedure to be awarded with the hosting of a sports mega event where the socio-political and economic environment of the host play a crucial role (Dowse and Fletcher 2018). It is also noted that emerging countries might find it difficult to meet certain hosting criteria, especially when it comes to infrastructure and

economic capacities. Unfortunately, this situation opens up potential candidates to corruption and it makes “event hosts – particularly those in the developing world – [...] potentially vulnerable to exploitation by the event owner” (Dowse and Fletcher 2018, 745). Furthermore, the absence of stability in either economic, governmental or social sense contributes only further to the incentive for developing countries to sports mega events to showcase the opposite or attract investment to combat issues related to stability (Dowse and Fletcher 2018).

*Table 1 Sports mega events in emerging States in recent and upcoming years*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Host Country</i>
2008	Olympic Games	China (Beijing)
2010	Commonwealth Games	India (Delhi)
2014	Winter Olympics	Russia (Sochi)
2014	FIFA World Cup	Brazil
2016	Olympic Games	Brazil (Rio de Janeiro)
2018	FIFA World Cup	Russia
2022	FIFA World Cup	Qatar

However, this is not to say that hosting sports mega events exposes emerging countries more than it can possibly benefit them. Similar to other host countries, developing and emerging countries benefit from “the representation, branding and imagineering of cities or nations for local and international consumption under the legitimization of transnational competitiveness” (Cornelissen 2010, 3013) even when their domestic political characteristics are rather unattractive (Grix and Lee 2013). The image branding aspect of sports mega events can “[serve] as a focal point both for the type of society and state these authorities try to create, as well as for the position in the international order these rulers attempt to craft” (Cornelissen 2010, 3008). While this is not exclusive to developing and emerging countries, it does add value to their promotion of their distinct idea of state and society. For China, South Africa and Brazil, hosting a sports mega event also opened up the possibility to practice public diplomacy to replenish their reputation on the global stage (Grix and Lee 2013).

### **2.3 Impact on Economy and Soft Power**

Sports mega events stimulate inward investment (Horne 2017) and contribute greatly to business vitality (Hall 2006) but also provide a platform for corporate investment in the sports sector. Especially sports mega events, show the sports sector's unbound way of conducting business and realize gain (Hall 2006) without having this business philosophy substantially challenged by neither regulatory intervention by the government nor the wider public with the possible power of protest or simply stopping to support respective business actors. However, high investments for short-term gains are said to be dangerous while neglecting possible negative long-term impacts on the host nation (Hall 2006). In most cases of sports mega events, event-related investments prior to the actual event are part of public policy and thus they derive from public finances as opposed to outside investment (Whitson and Horne 2006; Grix 2014). This where miscalculations can sneak in and public money investments are not converted into public and economic benefits. For Hall (2006), miscalculation constitutes the largest threat to mega events in general. The economic benefit can easily be miscalculated before the event due to reasons ranging from an overly optimistic outlook on the event to outright corruption. In addition, the infrastructure required for the mega event can turn out to be too specific in nature and fails to meet its initial purpose of furthering economic development in the long run as it simply cannot be appropriately implemented post-event. In this context, miscalculation has also been described as "the gap between optimistic forecasts and the actual impacts of Games on the local economy, society, and culture" (Whitson and Horne 2006, 73) and that "forecasts of the benefits are nearly always wrong" (Horne and Menzenreiter 2006, 9). In contrast to the argument of Whitson and Horne (2006), it has been pointed out that the percentage of public sector investment is rather low and ever has been while there was "a substantial increase in the proportion of the funding contributed by the franchise for facility construction" (Crompton 2004, 41). Though, it is to say that Crompton did, in fact, only refer to funding mechanisms for sport facility construction and not sports mega events which comprise more than just facilities.

For urban re-imaging strategies, infrastructure is the focal point. Sports mega events are therefore the perfect opportunity for host nations and host cities to improve on their infrastructure and, thereby, urban growth and development (Schimmel 2006). Regional and local governments incentivize planning actors to compete in (re)vitalizing infrastructure or developing new infrastructure. This provides international commissions with an indication as to whether a location is fit to host a venue of the magnitude of a sports mega event (Whitson

and Horne 2006). Moreover, infrastructure built for the event contributes positively for the host location in two ways. Either it adds to the location's attractiveness in the long run and/or it will simply serve the purpose of additional infrastructure to facilitate economic development (Hall 2006).

Another expected economic impact of sports mega events is the rise of tourism during the event but also it is anticipated to promote the location to the extent that long term increase in tourism is stimulated (Horne 2017). Although the hosting of a sports mega event undeniably attracts tourism in the masses in the particular year of hosting, a steady increase in tourism is not guaranteed in the long run (Whitson and Horne 2006).

On a more macroeconomic level, centralized countries may seek to diversify their economy and strengthen more peripheral and less competitive regions as counterpart to their economic powerhouse by stimulating economic growth, investments and infrastructure improvements through hosting sports mega events (Golubchikov and Slepukhina 2014). In terms of poverty reduction through strengthening peripheral regions are not guaranteed for by the impact of sports mega events (Pillay and Bass 2008).

While sports mega events can certainly have great economic impact, the strategic political benefits and the impact on the host's soft power are arguably the superior motives to host sports mega events (Grix and Lee 2013; Grix and Houlihan 2014). In other words, sports mega events are used as a diplomatic tool by the host country (Hall 2006) where the "socializing of others through public diplomacy" is a guarantor for an increase in the host's soft power (Grix and Lee 2013). The politicization and instrumentalization of sports mega events entail the promotion of the country's image as well as international prestige (Black 2007; Cornelissen 2010; Finlay and Xin 2010; Grix 2012; Grix and Houlihan 2014). Image augmentation and nation branding are essential in how the host of a sports mega event can benefit from it and ultimately increase its soft power. This is especially important for emerging states as sports mega events provide the perfect platform to invite the world into your home and promote your idea of culture and state. It allows emerging states to advocate both for the type of society and state these authorities try to create, as well as for the position in the international order these rulers attempt to craft" (Cornelissen 2010, 3008). However, the opportunity and benefits of promoting domestic values, domestic society and domestic state affairs are not exclusive to emerging states. Generally, sports mega events facilitate the host to signal important changes of direction, reframe dominant

narratives about the host, and/or reinforce key messages of change” (Black 2007, 261). Furthermore, an improved image of the host is highly likely to also change or improve how the host is viewed internationally. Foreign perception does not only refer to how foreign governments perceive the host but also how foreign publics perceive the host. In the end, an improved image leads to a better perception of foreign states and foreign publics which will ultimately result in international prestige of the host (Grix 2012).

Already during the bidding process, awareness of the importance of domestic and foreign public perception are showcased in their attempts of imagineering. Brannagan and Guilianotti (2015) refer to this awareness as glocal consciousness where states recognize how essential their perception is to their success in public diplomacy and on the international political stage in general. Two of the examples Brannagan and Guilianotti (2015) use to substantiate their argument of glocal consciousness are Germany and South Africa and their respective hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2006 and 2010. Germany wanted to counter the rather dull, unfunny and stiff stereotype of Germany along long overdue image redemption from World War II. In order to so, they gave the 2006 FIFA World Cup the motto of ‘A time to make friends’ (German: ‘Die Welt zu Gast bei Freunden’). This storyline enabled Germany to re-brand itself into the friendly neighbor. South Africa had an entirely different task when hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup as it was the first sports mega event hosted in Africa and therefore the pressure to represent South Africa as host nation but also to represent the whole African continent lasted on South Africa’s shoulders. South Africa portrayed the event as an ‘African showpiece’ aside the motto ‘It’s time. Celebrate Africa’s Humanity’ (Sotho-Tswana: ‘Ke Nako’). In that sense the 2010 FIFA World Cup was successfully applied in showing solidarity and continental unity (Cornelissen 2004). As can be seen with Germany and South Africa, both countries were aware of their respective task to portray themselves which shines a new light on them on the global stage and change their global image. Both cases are good examples of host nations proving their glocal consciousness.

Successfully hosting a sports mega event can be a good reference point for the hosting of future mega venues (Hall 2006) as well as signaling to other countries the readiness to engage on the global economic landscape as a serious actor and not just a country from the sidelines (Grix 2012; Grix and Houlihan 2014; Grix and Brannagan 2016). Such an acceptance onto the “world’s mature economies” (Grix and Houlihan 2014, 573) sets an example for other countries

in a similar position (Cornelissen 2010). Nonetheless, Grix and Houlihan (2014) caution against certain factors that have to be accounted for when using a sports mega event as a literal reference point. Based on their analysis of the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany, three factors are to be considered. Firstly, the outcome of an event can act as amplifier of the original image of the host location before the event. If the event host has a good image prior to the event, the event will only further the already positive image. On the end of the spectrum, an event host with a rather negative or bad image can experience an image backlash during or after the event which results in the event simply aggravating the host's image. Secondly, Germany, or any other highly advanced country for that matter, are a bad point of reference for other lesser developed or infrastructurally advanced host applicants. Thirdly, the German political elite was supposedly only out for improving their image abroad which might not be the absolute objective of other host applicants.

## **2.4 Legacy**

When it comes to assessing the success of a sports mega event, it is often referred to as the legacy it leaves behind. Thomson et al. (2013) argue that a sports mega event's legacy is the reason why policy planners promote such events in the first place in order to justify event-related investments. However, a legacy in this context can mean much more than that. Grix (2012) identifies five conjectures in such legacies. First, elite sport is supposed to serve as motivation for the masses to participate in sports as well which supposedly translates to health improvements of the general populous. Secondly, an increase in general revenue as well as in tourism is hoped for through the event. Thirdly, the 'feel-good' factor surrounding the event raises the host citizen's well-being. Fourthly, overall improvement of society is facilitated by urban development. And finally, showcasing the nation will result in significant soft power benefits. Horne (2017) goes a step further in categorizing legacies into two dimensions: tangibility and scope. Tangible legacy features refer to economic benefits and infrastructure whereas intangible legacy features generally refer to soft power benefits such as place or image branding. The scope of legacies can be between selective and/or universal. Legacies of sports mega events can selectively reinforce individualist and elitist interests. On the contrary, they can also be universal and accessible for the masses in a communal, collectivist and democratic fashion. While social impact of sports mega events and their legacy as a concept is difficult to define as such and further measure for sports mega events, Ohman et al. (2006) note that it is

the perception of impact that plays a crucial role in determining the legacy of a sports mega event. Facts are ultimately inferior in post-event debates as perception evokes a more emotional reaction to an event than stating mere facts does. Theodoraki (2016) takes this a step further and sees two reasons why the assessment of a sports mega event's impact has to be carefully contextualized. On one hand, the public can easily be biased towards the event and its legacy due to their "positive emotive predisposition", and on the other hand "the national, international and transnational mega-event governance structures and systems, which are founded on monopolistic or oligopolistic contracts", are still to be considered (Theodoraki 2016, 186).

## **2.5 Criticism and Negative Effects**

It has been argued that "much of the discourse that prevails today on sport mega-events centers on their economic dimensions, and the short- and long-term impacts that an event could have for hosts" (Cornelissen 2010, 3009). However, discourse around sports mega events has increasingly exercised critique on sports mega events and that their benefits are even said to be 'circumscribed' (Pillay and Bass 2008). Sports mega events are not one-sided or display purely beneficial soft power outcomes. For Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015), this is reflected in 'soft disempowerment'. Soft disempowerment refers to the mere acknowledgement of the fact that soft power can have both positive and negative outcomes. Where positive soft power effects can empower the host nation, negative soft power effects can be disempowering. In this regard, it is referred to "those occasions in which you may upset, offend or alienate others" that are ultimately damaging to reputation and international image (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, 706). Generally, the negative effects of sports mega events can be corruption, environmental cost and environmental footprint, human rights violations, social costs, securitization, and nationalism (Dashper et al. 2014; Theodoraki 2016). Typically, the aforementioned negative effects of sports mega events are internal and affect the host nation itself. Thus, their direct link to the host's soft power are rather weak. However, these effects can impede on the host's image and compromise the legacy the event left behind which eventually has negative consequences on the host's soft power.

Next to the aforementioned promotional symbolism of sports mega events that manifests itself in soft power benefits, Horne (2017) identified another form of symbolism around sports mega events: protest. The international staging of the event and the corresponding attention it

receives, it provides the perfect platform to be seized and used to demonstrate perceived social injustice and other possible drawbacks. As can be seen in Table 1, recent sports mega events have been subject to protest issues where the host nation has been criticized for various reasons.

*Table 2 Contentious issues at selected sports mega events 2008-2022*

<i>Host country &amp; Year</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Protest Issues</i>
Beijing 2008	Summer Olympic & Paralympic Games	Human rights, global torch relay
London 2012	Summer Olympic & Paralympic Games	Disability, workers' rights, displacement
Sochi 2014	Winter Olympic & Paralympic Games	Homophobia, environment, ethnic minority populations
Brazil 2014	FIFA World Cup	Displacement, political priorities, workers' rights, environment
Rio de Janeiro 2016	Summer Olympic & Paralympic Games	
Glasgow 2014	Commonwealth Games	Displacement, independence referendum
Russia 2018	FIFA World Cup	Workers' rights, war
Qatar 2022	FIFA World Cup	Worker's rights, environment

Not too long ago, environmental concerns were voiced and received attention when analyzing sports mega events. Peak influx of tourists, drastic event-related increases in infrastructure usage, and additional public transport to facilitate the masses leave an environmental footprint and “despite recent calls to reduce the environmental impact of major sporting events, comprehensive measurements, evaluations, and reports on environmental sustainability (ES) within the sport sector are rare” (Mallen et al. 2010, 97). As of 2019, financial gain has reigned supreme over human rights, environmental and other social injustice concerns and furthermore the steps taken to establish a framework that prevents said inadequacies for a contemporary sports mega event. Dowse and Fletcher (2018) explain shortcomings of that nature by a generally uninformed public and the lack of event-related information on matters such as environmental footprint or human rights violations. They proceed further in their argument by comparing the imbalance of information between the economic benefit of sports mega events

and problems that come with it. While they acknowledge the undeniable component of economic and financial gain, they criticize the fact that the challenges of sports mega events have not been substantially highlighted in existing academic literature and would further encourage a more thorough and fair investigation of sports mega events. This claim is supported by Cornelissen (2010) who adds the focus long-term impacts as well as Black (2007) who highlights the unrealistic nature of sports mega event studies due to their focus on the economic and developmental side of sports mega events.

## **2.6 Media Diplomacy**

As previously mentioned, it is important to emphasize the role of the media when examining soft power. Soft power can be received very differently where one party might be very drawn to the foreign policy of a certain country whereas another party might be repelled by it. Clearly, this depends as much on the recipient as it does on the soft power actor. However, it is certain that language plays an arguably great role in how to use soft power to its highest efficiency and effectiveness. Mattern (2005) even goes as far as claiming that soft power is in fact a continuation of hard power due to the compelling force that is language. In this respect, the soft power characteristic of attraction is seen as “representational force – a nonphysical but nevertheless coercive form of power that is exercised through language” (Mattern 2005, 583). This is further supported by Gilboa (2008, 62) in the sense that “the media and the public [...] perceive power as hard power and do not necessarily see a contradiction between the two”. This highlights just how dependent soft power can be on the media. It has been proven that the media has indeed a great influence on public opinion whether it shapes it or its reflects it (Macnamara 2005). This translates well into politics where “it is thought that the media shape foreign public sentiments, which in turn affect the acquiescence or resistance of foreign elites to particular foreign policy goals” (Szostek 2014, 463). Even more so, today’s media is accessible worldwide and, therefore, fuels the dynamic of foreign policy being conducted via narratives (Riley 2014). The media has undeniably become an elementary part of public diplomacy. More specifically, public diplomacy is the result of the relationship between the three main components of the government, the media and public opinion (Gilboa 1998; Soroka 2003).

Nye (2008, 107) presented the media as one of the so-called “referees for credibility or legitimacy” between the source of soft power and the receiver of soft power. Here the media

takes the role of the intermediary. An intermediary of great influence whose position comes with the power of manipulating the outcome almost at will and ultimately shape domestic and foreign public opinion. Naturally, it is believed that positive foreign reporting will also reflect positively on domestic politics which is supposed facilitate foreign policy success (Szostek 2014). In order to increase such chances of success, the media deploys several strategies that can change public perception for better or worse according to Gilboa (2008). Most common strategies are ‘agenda setting’, ‘framing’, and ‘priming’. Agenda setting refers to the fallacy of the public that the most presented and reported issue in the media is automatically ascribed to be the most important and most pressing. With this strategy, the media can easily shift the focus of public interest. Framing is similar. Here the media stresses specific definitions, angles, or interpretations of an issue at hand to frame it in a certain way to also shape public opinion. Priming suggests certain assessment criteria and evaluation standards for public figures that shape the discourse around said figures.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This thesis used a qualitative content analysis. Since this study analyzes newspaper articles, this study is also a media content analysis that favors qualitative analysis over quantifying results. A qualitative content analysis retains the strengths of a quantitative content analysis but allows for more text interpretation which will ultimately bear more analytical depth and contextualization of results (Kohlbacher 2006). Analytical depth and contextualization of results is important in exploring the polysemic nature of media texts and comprehensively understanding potential meanings of the texts at hand (Macnamara 2005). As a concept that is difficult to measure, soft power could be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted when analyzed purely quantitatively. Due to its subjectivity and fragility, soft power has to be contextualized. The examined literature provides the perfect framework in which to contextualize the subsequent media texts. This qualitative content analysis first used its content analysis characteristic to identify research-relevant newspaper articles based on the keywords and key concepts that are further explained in the conceptualization. Afterwards, the qualitative analytical part allowed for interpretation and contextualization of the results of the content analysis.

### **3.1 Conceptualization**

As aforementioned, soft power remains a difficult concept to measure and not many scholars have actually developed a proper conceptualization of soft power to explain the individual dimensions of soft power as well as the relationship between respective dimensions. Arguably, the only viable conceptualizations stem from McClory's Soft Power 30 report and Grix and Brannagan's soft power package identified in the literature review. While both soft power conceptualizations have their advantages, they share crucial disadvantages as well. First, these conceptualizations are about soft power as the basis. However, this research requires a suitable combination of soft power and sports mega events. Second, the individual soft power dimensions of both conceptualizations can be said to be difficult to measure. McClory's Soft Power 30 report already deploys its very own operationalization which would have to be included as well as deployed for its conceptualization to work for this thesis. Grix and Brannagan's soft power package is conceptualized into concepts in itself which would neither provide clear measurements nor adequate keywords. Third, these conceptualizations fail to

account for negative soft power effects of sports mega events and soft power in general. Clearly, the negative aspects of sports mega events on soft power are a focal point of this thesis. Both reasons disqualify the previously mentioned conceptualization for the basis of this thesis' methodology.

The conceptualization employed in this research is based on the negative effects of sports mega events identified in the section 2.2.3 *Criticism and negative effects*. It has been established that the soft power benefits of sports mega events are circumscribed (Pillay and Bass 2008) and that the negative effects of sports mega events can be corruption, environmental cost and environmental footprint, human rights violations, social costs, securitization, terrorism, gentrification and nationalism (Dashper et al. 2014; Theodoraki 2016; Whitson and Horne 2006). But, negative effects of sports mega events could remain just that: negative effects. However, as the argument of section 2.3 *Media diplomacy* shows, the media's role is rather unaccounted for in this equation. Thus, the media is the decisive factor in how these negative effects are portrayed and conveyed to the wider public. The narratives that the media builds about the host country in regard to its sports mega event determine the impact the event has on the host's soft power. Social costs, securitization, terrorism, gentrification and nationalism were excluded in this research due to this thesis' limited timeframe, limited resources, a limited word count that needs to allow for an in-depth analysis rather than superficial data gathering where limited word count prevents the excluded concepts to be properly contextualized due to their rather difficult measurability without dedicating extensive resources and space to their literary review, and their unlikely occurrence in newspaper articles or reports on the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Finally, corruption, environmental cost and environmental footprint, and human rights violations remain as negative effects of sports mega events to identify media narratives that lead to Russia's inability to notably capitalize on the soft power benefits of hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Corruption, environmental cost and environmental footprint, human rights violations are already suitable keywords that are likely to be featured in newspaper lingo. In combination with variations and synonyms of these keywords (e.g. corruption, corrupt, embezzlement), these keywords certainly yield research-relevant newspaper articles for analysis.

The inclusion of reputation and image in analyzing media narratives that led to Russia's soft power to remain unchanged despite hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup as a separate narrative

category rests on the argument that it is a cumulative category. Reporting on Russia's image and reputation captures media reporting that is in fact connected to the aforementioned narratives of corruption, human rights and environmental concerns but also what is not explicitly mentioned under the other categories' keywords. Furthermore, while corruption, human rights and environment narratives are rather specific in nature, the narrative category of image and reputation is more focused on the overall portrayal of Russia through the media. Narratives on image and reputation showcase the big picture of Russia as seen by the media. Therefore, it stands as a separate conceptual narrative category.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

Since this research applied a qualitative content analysis on media perspective to examine the role of negative media narratives as to why Russia's soft power did in fact not change despite hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup, this study focuses on officially published newspaper articles. They provide the simple advantage of being official and archived which allows for future research to revisit them. In the era of social media, an analysis of online presence of the mass media would certainly contribute to the width of this study and further add to the reach of said media. However, social media such as Facebook or Twitter show a crucial error that can be detrimental to any findings or conclusions drawn from their analytical results: social media allows for more user expression in emojis and indirect speech rhetoric such as irony or sarcasm. A scenario which is highly unlikely to occur in print media and official newspaper articles in general. Aforementioned shortcomings of social media in analytical terms would threaten any outcome of a content analysis. Where newspaper articles rely mostly on factual, pure and rather professional language, social media can resort to convey a message with the use of imagery and typical social media lingo in addition to emojis or a thumbs-up.

The decision to analyze news channels in the form of newspapers instead of news agencies is based on their difference in their reporting. News agencies such as Reuters, Associated Press (AP) or Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) deliver news and images to news channels. News agencies' raw version of news can then be contextualized and explained. It is the contextualization of news that provides a certain angle or even a subjective opinion. While news from news agencies might be useful for an analysis that looks purely at facts, news channels forge this news into their stories and report on these issues to their own purpose. In the context

of the role the media plays in informing the wider public and furthermore deliver a message, news channels have a greater influence on opinionating the wider public. However, the relationship between news channels and their readership is not a one-way street. News channels do not just put out a news story with the expectation of the reader to take it as it is but rather pick certain angles that pander to the opinion, attitude or position of their respective audience.

The most circulated newspapers worldwide would certainly provide the best reference point of identifying media narratives about Russia and its hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. However, the most circulated newspapers worldwide paint a different picture. As can be seen in Table 3, there are only two newspapers written in the English language that are among the top ten of most circulated newspapers worldwide. These newspapers are USA Today from the US and The Times of India from India. It can be argued that The Times of India has a rather domestic or regional readership.

*Table 3 Most circulated newspapers worldwide*

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Circulation (thousands)</i>
1	The Yomiuri Shimbun	Japan	Japanese	9,101
2	The Asahi Shimbun	Japan	Japanese	6,622
3	USA Today	USA	English	4,139
4	Dainik Bhaskar	India	Hindi	3,818
5	Dainik Jagran	India	Hindi	3,308
6	The Mainichi Newspapers	Japan	Japanese	3,166
7	Cankao Xiaoxi	China	Chinese	3,073
8	Amar Ujala	India	Hindi	2,935
9	The Times of India	India	English	2,836
10	The Nikkei	Japan	Japanese	2,729

Source: Newspapers With The Highest Circulation In The World (Oishimaya 2019).

While the other newspapers are indeed the most circulated, it can certainly be argued that these numbers are solely due to the size of their possible viewership. Unfortunately, the language

barrier along the aforementioned reason deny the validity of the argument that the most circulated newspapers worldwide would provide the best point of reference for the analytical basis of this thesis.

Therefore, the online newspaper archive Factiva was used in identifying research-relevant newspaper articles. Factiva is one of the biggest newspaper archives and has the advantage of free access. Factiva allows for an in-depth search of newspaper articles with the help of various filters for different sources, authors, companies, subjects, industries, regions, languages as well as a search form where particular keywords and phrases can be coded into the desired search outcome. In this regard, pre-selecting specific newspapers or news outlets as the analytical scope are redundant as the aforementioned feature of selecting newspaper articles based on keywords and phrases delivers more precise and relevant results.

### **3.3 Operationalization**

In order to receive the most research-relevant newspaper articles without the interference of research-unrelated newspaper articles, it was important to set up the Factiva filters. First, only newspaper articles were selected. The second filter was the time frame between 01 January 2018 and 01 January 2019. This was to account for the fact that the world of news is a world with a short attention span where it is only about finding the next big news story. Additionally, soft power effects that were not related to the 2018 FIFA World Cup were to be excluded. Third, the language was set to filter newspaper exclusively written in the English language. The keywords 'Russia' and 'World Cup 2018' narrowed the scope of the first pre-liminary search of possible newspaper articles. The total results of this search were 13,869 newspaper articles.

Clearly, more keywords and phrases were to be added to the search form in order to narrow down the bulk of newspaper articles further to be able to determine newspaper narratives. This is where the aforementioned negative effects of sports mega events came into play as identified in the literature review. 'Corruption' and 'environment', and 'human rights' were rather straight forward and presented already good keywords in themselves. However, to obtain the most research-relevant newspaper articles for each category, it was important to check for related words or terms that might be used in newspaper language. For corruption, all literal relations to the word such as corrupt or corrupted were included as well as the synonym 'embezzlement'.

For environment, the keywords ‘pollution’, ‘green’, ‘energy’, ‘sustainability’, ‘sustainable’, ‘global warming’ were added. For human rights, the scope was broadened to match keywords the language used in newspaper articles in regard to anything human rights related. Thus, human rights included searches for the keywords ‘gay’, ‘gay rights’, ‘pussy riot’, ‘riot’, ‘insurgency’, ‘insurrection’, ‘insurgence’, ‘rebellion’, ‘revolt’, ‘uprising’, ‘uproar’, ‘rally’, ‘demonstration’ and ‘protest’. In complementation of corruption, environment, and human rights, the keywords ‘image’ and ‘reputation’ were included in the search to identify negative narratives that portray the big picture of Russia and refer to Russia’s overall image and reputation.

While Russian hooliganism and possible clashes with foreign fans were a much-discussed topic before the World Cup, they were disregarded as exclusive term in the search. Hooligans reflect rather on football culture and have arguably little influence on Russia’s overall soft power in regard the World Cup. Furthermore, the argument is that if hooliganism was to play a role in Russia’s soft power or the image it portrayed during the World Cup it would occur in relation to the keywords that were used.

### **3.4 Limitations**

This study and its research come with limitations as does almost every scientific study. The research is limited in its timeframe. While immediate and direct soft power effects of the 2018 FIFA World Cup would have to be noticed in a short period after the event, a more longitudinal approach would increase the chances to all negative effects of the World Cup to surface and furthermore for them to be reported on by the media subsequently. However, this is speculative and rather an academic guess valid not even two years after the event. Furthermore, the more time passes after the event, the higher the difficulty in evidently tracing soft power effects directly back to the event. Limited time and resources prevented the analysis of all 13,869 newspaper articles that are connected to Russia and its 2018 FIFA World Cup. This would certainly enhance the identification of all possible narratives that could have influenced Russia’s soft power positively or negatively. It is also to recognize that this thesis analyzed newspaper exclusively written in English. Clearly, this fails to capture possible narratives of newspapers in other languages. Social media was disregarded in this research as possible data source due to its problematic nature in analyzing in a content analysis due to the common use of indirect speech. However, the exclusion of social media does constitute a limitation of this research as it could hold more narratives than identified here. Furthermore, this thesis focuses

on one sports mega event in the 2018 FIFA World Cup and, therefore, also only one host. To further substantiate the argument of media narratives significantly affecting the outcome a sports mega event has on the host's soft power, sports mega events and hosts would have to be compared on a standardized basis.

The search results were limited as well. As for corruption, during the 2018 FIFA World Cup quite numerous sources were reporting on another corruption scandal that are not particularly event related. The scandal concerns corruption inside the Croatian football association and government officials where it is reported on decade long intrinsic problems with corrupt officials. Moreover, newspaper articles have only been selected for this analysis when the FIFA corruption scandal or Sepp Blatter were mentioned in relation to the dubious circumstances of how Russia was awarded with hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup but were discarded when only the scandal was mentioned without clear connection to Russia or its hosting of the World Cup. Unfortunately, the total number of hits for 'environment' were distorted by its use in football context where the environment of dressing rooms was addressed. Surprisingly, the inclusion of other environmental keywords failed to provide any results either. Newspapers did mention energy or other environmental deals or issues regarding Russia and possible partners. But, said articles were missing the actual link to the Russia's hosting of the World Cup. This rather disappointing finding will be further discussed in the analysis. The categories of image and human rights held more results proportionate to their total results. For both categories, newspaper articles had to be excluded when they failed to showcase a connection to Russia and its hosting of the World Cup. In addition to event-unrelated reporting, newspaper articles featured the keyword 'image' quite often in the context of football or guest nations and their fans as well as in description of an actual image which is featured in the newspaper article.

## **Chapter 4: Russia**

### **4.1 Re-Imagineering Post-Cold War Russia**

Russia has not enjoyed the best narratives in the international sphere and has been suffering from their ‘bad boy image’ ever since the Cold War. Throughout the last century, Russia typically engaged largely in international politics with hard power with colonizing tendencies (Li and Marsh 2016). Although Russia’s middle class has been growing due to economic reform after the Cold War (Li and Marsh 2016), it is still facing economic stagnation which complicates their efforts to “project a positive international image” (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016, 395). Possible reasons for Russia’s bad international image can be many. Russia scores notoriously low in freedom of press indices. Russia’s place remained unchanged on the World Press Freedom Index since 2013 ranked 149th. Its alleged involvement in the 2016 U.S. election questioned Russia’s international integrity. Furthermore, Russia has been regularly persecuting and killing individuals that were critical of Kremlin politics. Evidently, there was “the arrest of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003, the murder of exiled former spy Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, the death in jail of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in 2009, and the assassination of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in 2015” (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016, 405).

### **4.2 Russia’s Image and Reputation after the Cold War**

With the fall of the Iron Curtain after the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, former Soviet states and Russian neighboring countries should have been the focus of Russia’s sphere of influence and soft power focus based on historical ties in culture and language. However, Russia’s sphere of influence seized both in Central Asia and in more Western territories such as the Baltic states or Ukraine. As for Central Asia, it has been argued that Russia lost the battle of influence to China (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016).

As for the Western territories, Russia has all but to blame themselves for acting the bully on the playground. Russia’s soft power use in the Baltic states can even be argued to be rather hard power due to its rigid and demanding nature to interfere with and constrain the independence of the Baltic states. Coercion and blackmail in the energy sector are certainly to be considered a prime example of hard power but it also influences negatively the perception of Russia in the

Baltic states. As actual soft power influences of Russia in the Baltic states it is best to look at “the creation, maintenance and support of Kremlin-friendly networks of influence in the cultural, economic and political sectors” (Grigas 2012, 9). These networks enable Russia to push Russian narratives and promote their values.

The Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008 certainly contributed further to Russia’s bully reputation (Ćwiek-Karpowicz 2012). However, Russia tried to redeem themselves after the conflict by setting up the Compatriot Legal Support and Protection Fund, promoting the bond between Russia and its neighbors (labor market accessibility, language proximity, common culture) as well as facilitating youth movements in so-called compatriot countries that are Russia’s neighboring countries. To retain their influence in the Balkan states, “Russia’s increasingly active policy towards Serbia and the Serbian minorities in the neighboring countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo – has been part of a larger plan aimed at hampering the integration of the Balkan states with the Euro-Atlantic structures and maintaining an area of instability and frozen conflicts in the EU’s near neighborhood” (Szpala 2014, 1). This strategy appears to be successful because the EU has since steadily reduced their support of European integration in the Balkan region. In the case of Ukraine, Russia’s desperation for retaining its sphere of influence becomes the most evident as it is “more than a foreign policy priority [but rather] an existential imperative” (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012, 1). Similar to other neighboring countries, Ukraine is exposed to Russia’s soft power strategy prioritizing cultural and language history over civic identities and emphasizes the glorified past of the ‘Russian World’ (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Feklyunina 2016). Clearly, Russia does possess the soft power tools in labor market accessibility, language and culture proximity but it has failed so far to successfully bring its neighboring countries closer to Kremlin politics (Ćwiek-Karpowicz 2012). Still, Russia has recognized the urgency and the necessity to put its foreign policy on par with contemporary standards (Sergunin and Karabeshkin 2015).

### **4.3 Russia’s Re-Branding Efforts**

Even though Russia has been said to suffer from ‘traditional image impotence’ (Rutland & Kazantsev 2016), Russia is actively trying to re-brand itself and counter its negative perception. To increase their media reach on an international level, the news channel Russia Today (RT) has been introduced to enhance Russia’s international voice and further establish pro-Russian narratives (Li and Marsh 2016; Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). The ‘Integrated Strategy for

Expanding Russia's Humanitarian Influence in the World' was established in 2014 to dismantle prejudices towards Russia's image (Stuenkel 2016). In this regard, the Russian Foreign Policy Concepts of 2008 and 2013 included objectives to effectively improve the public opinion on Russia abroad (Szostek 2014). For further international cooperation and Russia's integration into global politics several NGOs were founded (Wilson 2015). As can be seen, Russia does recognize its own suboptimal international image and thus tries to make soft power amends.

The increase in large venues hosted by Russia in recent times indicates further Russia's re-branding efforts. With Communism, Russia attempted to force a common identity through ideology on its multi-ethnic people. As history shows, this attempt failed. In this day and age, Russia tries a different approach. Instead of forcing identity in a top-down approach, they try to build the foundation for an identity to grow rather naturally in a bottom-up fashion. This is where sports mega events present a perfect opportunity (Grix and Kramareva 2017) and, therefore, have become a "dominant regional development strategy for the Russian government" (Golubchikov and Slepukhina 2014, 166). Sports mega events can unify domestic issues and bring the people of the host nation better together. In the recent past, Russia hosted two sports mega events in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 FIFA World Cup along other minor sports events as displayed in Table 4.

*Table 4 Large Sports Events in Russia 2010-2020*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Location</i>
2013	Universiade (International University Games)	Kazan
2014	Winter Olympics & Paralympics	Sochi
2015	World Cup Formula-1	Sochi
2016	IIHF World Hockey Championship	Moscow & St. Petersburg
2018	FIFA World Cup	11 major cities

As part of the BRICS countries, Russia is arguably a re-emerging state. Sports mega events hold particular value to re-emerging states as they associated with massive investment, whose

implications have both an external dimension (showcasing Russia as a re-emerging state) and an internal dimension (offering quick regeneration of the host cities)” (Golubchikov and Slepukhina 2014, 166). In other words, centralized countries such as Russia may seek to diversify their economy and strengthen more peripheral and less competitive regions as counterpart to their economic powerhouse by stimulating economic growth, investments and infrastructure improvements through hosting sports mega events (Golubchikov and Slepukhina 2014).

Although it has been argued that the Sochi Olympics were a successful use of soft power (Grix and Kramareva 2017) as the allegedly most expensive sports game in history (Golubchikov and Slepukhina 2014), this claim is not substantiated neither by the Soft Power 30 score nor by any other proper measurement for that matter. Rather, the hosting was linked to negative narratives. To host any sports mega event in Russia during that period was very unfortunate as the Crimean crisis just unraveled and Russia was under immense international pressure. In addition, there were significant concerns about corruption, displacement of people, and a fear of homophobic sentiments towards gay athletes by Russian anti-gay legislation (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). Awarding the hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup to Russia was also tied to issues of corruption due to the recently uncovered corruption scandal around former FIFA president Sepp Blatter in 2015. Russia has also been involved in several doping scandals over the years and has been banned several times as well from participating in global sports events.

#### **4.4 Russia in Soft Power Discourse**

The soft power discourse has largely been criticized when it comes to Russia. It has been criticized that the conceptual nature of soft power is too strict, especially when it comes to its application to emerging powers such as the BRICS states (Stuenkel 2016). On a more conceptual level, Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) argue that soft power and hard power are not exclusive exercises of power where either one is used but rather that “the Kremlin’s officially proclaimed preference for soft power instruments does not exclude the use of hard power tools: if necessary, and quite often, Russian authorities have tried to combine them” (Sergunin and Karabeshkin 2015, 348). As of 2019, the misunderstanding of Russia’s soft power has been pointed out as well. It has been argued that the academic literature around the analysis of Russia’s soft power is based on misconception, the liberal democratic origin of soft

power and the neglect of Russia's soft power potential through its conservative values. Keating and Kczmarska (2019) claim that it is essential to acknowledge the appeal of conservative values in global society and provides "the ability of non-Western states to challenge successfully the Western liberal order" (Keating and Kczmarska 2019, 1). The purpose of their research is "to demonstrate that the phenomenon [of Russia's soft power] exists, setting [themselves] against almost all other Russian soft power literature that fails to recognize it, and to develop useful analytical ideal types that can help guide future research" (Keating and Kczmarska 2019, 10). Their analytical standpoint holds truth in that indeed "different domestic actors will respond differently to Russian political values, and it is not necessary for the state as a whole to respond positively to argue that Russian soft power is having an effect" (Keating and Kczmarska 2019, 9). In light of the Soft Power 30 report, the claim of a Russia's unrecognized and supposedly neglected soft power potential through conservative values is rather bold and has since to be reflected in Russia's Soft Power 30 score since 2015. It could, however, be argued that this is due to the aforementioned lack of accounting for interference between soft power sub-indices and influence on one another in the Soft Power 30 report.

# Chapter 5: Results and Analysis

## 5.1 Results

The total number of newspaper articles that included all keywords mentioned in the methodology was 1,968 with 542 duplicates which left a total of 1,426 of possibly relevant newspaper articles. Figure 3 shows that most newspaper articles with given keywords appeared during the actual World Cup.

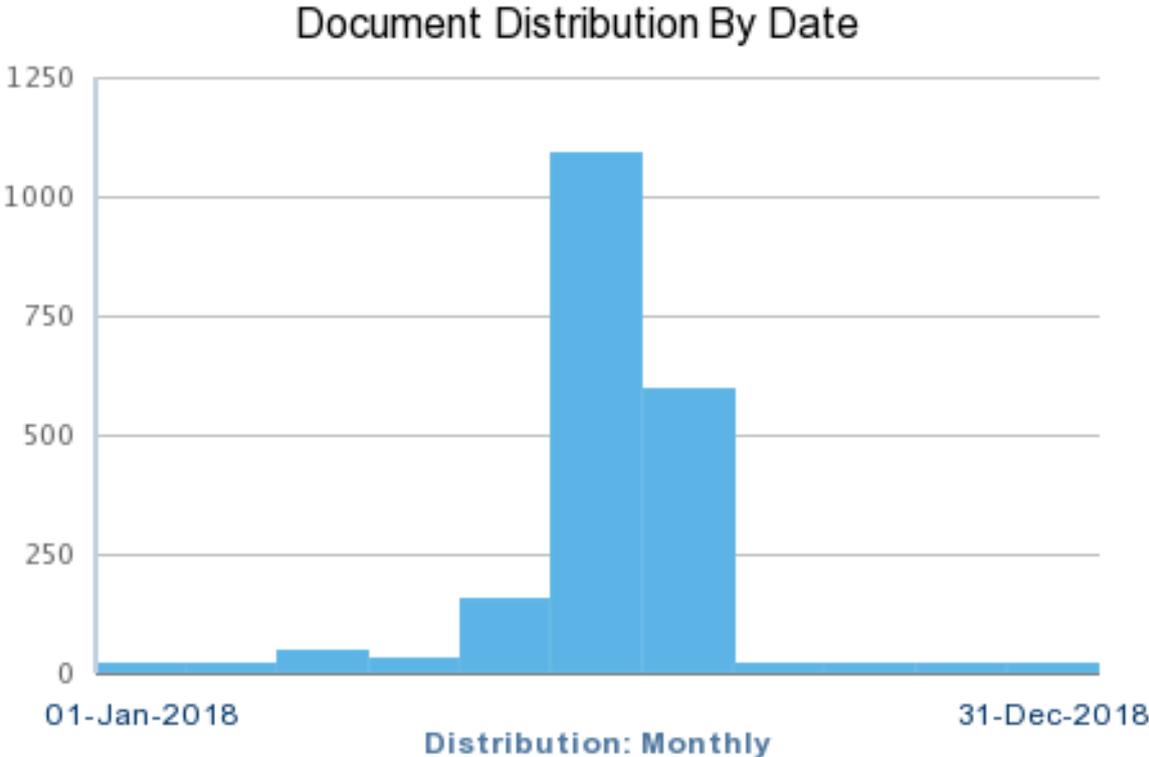


Figure 3 Newspaper Article Distribution (Factiva 2019)

Figure 4 indicates the most mentioned sources. Unsurprisingly, the most mentioned newspapers were of British origin due to English being the native language of Great Britain. Most newspapers were arguably tabloids such as *The Sun* or *The Mirror* that publish on a daily basis whereas other newspapers and magazines might differ in issue frequency. Furthermore, tabloids are rather superficial in their reporting where the focus is more on finding the next lurid headline as opposed to conservative in-depth journalistic research.

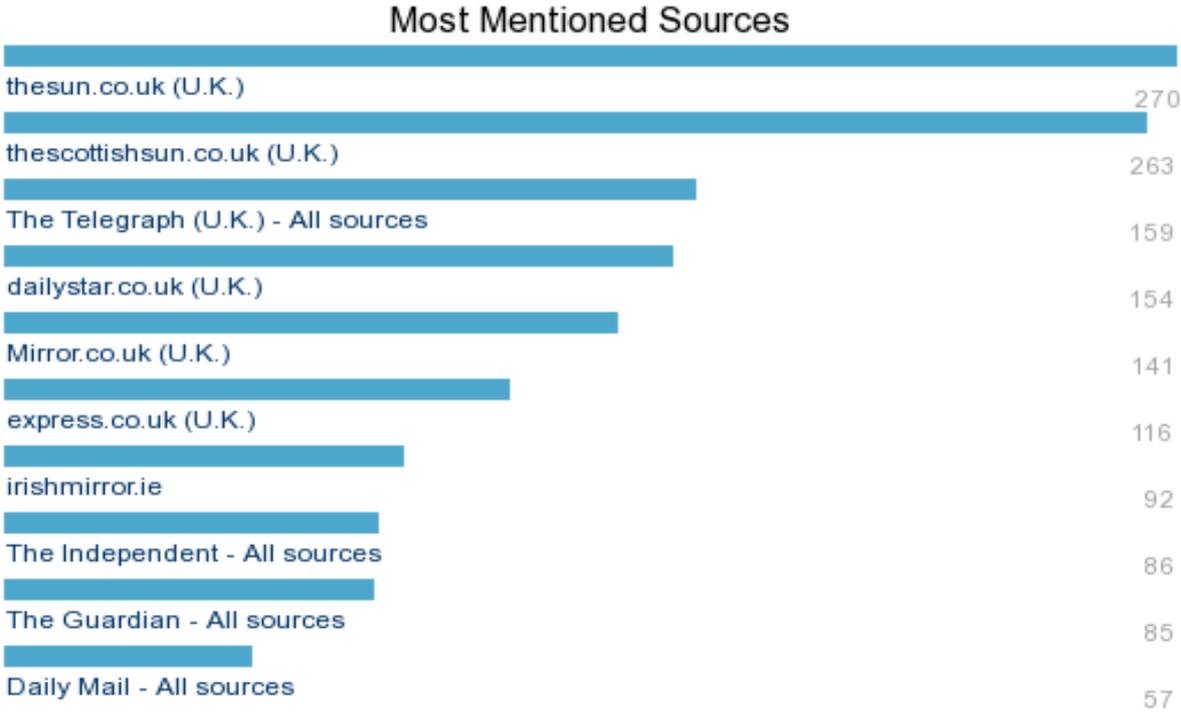


Figure 4 Most Mentioned Sources (Factiva 2019)

Table 5 shows the total number of articles for each category and the important number of research relevant newspaper articles per category. The human rights category showed the most research relevant results with 122 newspaper articles. The categories of corruption and image had 46 and 38 results respectively. While environment had the second highest total number of newspaper articles, only two newspaper articles featured research relevant content.

Table 5 Number of newspaper articles by keyword category

	<i>Corruption</i>	<i>Environment</i>	<i>Human rights</i>	<i>Image</i>
Total number	123	446	435	555
Research relevant	46	2	122	38

## 5.2 Analysis

Corruption, environmental cost and human rights violations are identified as negative effects of sports mega events by Dashper et al. (2014) and Theodoraki (2016). Undeniably, negative effects of a sports mega event can determine its legacy and therefore its actual soft power impact on and of the host nation. For the host to ultimately benefit from and capitalize on the soft power that is brought by the hosting of a sports mega event, the presentation of narratives around the event in the media are of utmost importance. The soft power success dependence of sports mega events is further emphasized by the fragile nature of soft power, especially in the context of a sports mega event. The fragility of soft power is mirrored in the following phenomena. Positive narratives of an already well-perceived event skyrocket its soft power effects for the host. This holds especially true when the host had good soft power even before the event which was the case for Germany when hosting the 2006 FIFA World Cup. However, the opposite case is more intriguing and showcases perfectly the fragility of soft power. If a host has a bad international reputation with little soft power, even the supposed soft power booster in the form of a sports mega event is hardly able to overcome a significant soft power deficit. Even more so, negative press about the event can exponentially aggravate the host's soft power situation and possibly damage it for years to come. Negative publicity contributes more to worsening an already bad soft power standing than positive publicity increases an already well-perceived soft power standing. In other words, "public diplomacy as a means to enhance agency has its risks; the world's gaze can often be focused on the negative aspects of the socio-economic and political system" (Grix and Lee 2013, 530).

In the case of Russia, soft power has been very low as shown in the annual Soft Power 30 report since at least 2015. However, it could certainly be argued that Russia's soft power has never been advantageous to begin with and is even referred to as being image impotent (Rutland & Kazantsev 2016). Subsequently, this means for Russia that the prospects of increasing its soft power through hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup are slim. Even more so, since the 2014 Winter Olympics also failed to register any soft power improvements. Unfortunately for Russia, the media portrayed Russia in such an antagonistic light by revealing issues of corruption or human rights violations that it became nearly impossible for Russia to capitalize on the soft power benefits that are said to be induced by hosting a sports mega event. The premise of hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup and benefiting from its soft power impact was naïve but feasible and logical in regard to what most academic literature would suggest. However, Russia's soft power

deficit provided the perfect basis for media narratives to worsen Russia's soft power situation even further.

### **5.2.1 Corruption Narrative**

Corruption can be a two-way street. There are always two parties involved in corruption: the briber and the bribed. Legally, both involvements can be punished. In terms of soft power, the impact can be even worse. An association with or an implication of corruption paints an untrustworthy picture of a country and is likely to be attributed to unreliability. A connection to corruption can be detrimental disregarding the degree to which the subject was actually involved in corruption. Generally, corruption is frowned upon in politics and counts as inexcusable political malpractice. It is seen as a failure of the government and the values it represents. Even loose connections to corruption or corrupt third parties are damaging to reputation and image, and therefore damaging the country's soft power. This has been the case for China's soft power in the West. While China possesses an appealing traditional culture, Nye (2005) argues that corruption is among the reasons why China's soft power is rather weak in the West. In the case of Russia and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, two narratives tainted Russia's soft power in regard to corruption. The media portrayed Russia as corrupt system in itself (Cook 2018; Wells 2018; Vanguard 2018) as well as connecting it to the FIFA corruption scandal and its embodiment in former FIFA President Sepp Blatter (Atkin 2018b; Atkin 2018c; Hills 2018; Oliphant 2018; The Citizen 2018a; The Sydney Morning Herald 2018; Wallace 2018).

The media painted the picture of Russia as if corruption presents itself as too tempting for Russia to resist from. The Russian system incorporated corruption to either deny its dismemberment and "widespread corruption" (Ashton 2018) appears to be the supposed solution to maintain a façade of a well-functioning country and a content civil society. Maintaining said façade goes as far as covering up massive infrastructure shortcomings where "Putin orders ramshackle buildings to be painted over with murals of happy locals to mask poverty" (Wells 2018). In addition, it was reported that "Vladimir Putin has reportedly told cops to refrain from publishing crime statistics to help Russia's image during the World Cup" (Hawken 2018). This shows how deep corruption is rooted from the highest to the lowest level and only further supported by the way the media is reporting on such matters. Phrases such as 'masking' emphasize the discrepancy of what Russia wants the outside to believe it is and what

is reality whereas intensive and generalizing terms such as ‘poverty’ portray the image of Russia as absolute. The narrative of Russia’s level of corruption in the media is further underlined in its legal system and the subsequent reporting on how dangerous it is even if people stay well within legal boundaries (Cook 2018). The legal system is arguably the best suited argument to prove the level of corruption.

A more concrete example of corruption in Russia is the claim of anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny that a significant part of Russia’s \$14 bn investment in the World Cup are supposedly embezzled (Vanguard 2018). While Navalny’s claim would require thorough investigation and examination of the entire World Cup investment plan, superficial proof can be found in the fact that “the final price for the Zenit Arena in St. Petersburg amounted to 700 per cent of the initial cost estimate” (Romanowski 2018). It could be argued that there ought to be factual evidence of Navalny’s claim before final judgements are made. However, this is not how the press operates. The media substantiated Navalny as credible source by highlighting how he is seen as the forbidden fruit and his name is not to be mentioned anywhere (Bet 2018). Evidently, this was interpreted as legitimacy of Navalny’s role as whistleblower and his corruption claims.

The FIFA corruption scandal unfolded around the then FIFA President Sepp Blatter. In 2015, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) indicted fourteen high-ranking officials. The allegations evolved around racketeering and money laundering. More specifically, votes during the voting process of awarding future hosting of the World Cups were said to be bought by bribing representatives. Especially the case of Russia for hosting in 2018 and Qatar hosting in 2022 received major attention where the case of Russia was claimed to be “as an endorsement of corrupt and aggressive regime” (Oliphant 2018). Concerns were outed about “FIFA’s disputed decision to award [2018’s] tournament to Russia instead of England” (The Citizen 2018a) which implies that Russia took the hosting of the event away from England and FIFA let it willingly happen due to its corrupt nature. While FIFA and Sepp Blatter were the focus of the investigation, the incorporation of Russia and its 2018 World Cup in this very scenario contributed negatively to Russia’s image. Clearly, the 2018 FIFA World Cup was met with skepticism from its announcement until the event itself. Putin was openly criticized for his involvement with Sepp Blatter who was officially invited to the event (The Citizen 2018a, The Sydney Morning Herald 2018). The emphasis on the “close relationship” (The Citizen 2018a)

as well as Putin's "personal invitation" (The Sydney Morning Herald 2018) while also mentioning the corrupt nature of FIFA puts Putin in an unfavorable light and since Putin is such a strong reference of Russian identity it also reflects badly on Russia's image negatively impacting their soft power. In hindsight, the decision of Putin to invite Blatter can be seen as disadvantageous as it can be seen as Putin tolerating the corrupt machinery that is FIFA.

### **5.2.2 Environmental Narrative**

Environmental concerns received underwhelming attention in the media. The only notable environmental concerns were voiced in a Nigerian newspaper where it was reported that "the newly-renovated Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow is among the venues for Russia's World Cup 2018 that received green standard certificates confirming their ecological sustainability and ensuring their post-tournament legacy" and that participating teams had to travel long distances from stadium to stadium or stadium to training ground (Odogwu 2018). Furthermore, Odogwu (2018) claimed that "now that Russia is hosting, green issues should be top on the agenda" due to Russia's precarious environmental situation and its sub-par ecological policies. While this does reflect very negatively on Russia and paints the picture of Russia as environmental sinner, these concerns remain very scarce throughout an entirety of 1,426 newspaper articles. There are two explanations as to why the environmental footprint of the event was largely absent in media coverage. First, corruption and human rights violations simply make for more potent news stories that resonate more with the readership. Second, it would have made it to more headlines in 2019. 2019 was arguably the year of Greta Thunberg, Friday's For Future and environmental activism. Newspapers reflect largely what people care about at the moment and the environmental concerns around the 2018 FIFA World Cup would have undoubtedly resonated more with readers in 2019.

### **5.2.3 Human Rights Narrative**

The international community has denounced Russia's behavior towards human rights and media coverage of the 2018 FIFA World Cup has shown exactly that. Before the event, travel reports warned fans and tourists of Russia's homophobic and racist sentiments (Armstrong 2018a; Calder 2018; Morris 2018; Nevett 2018) as well as to told travelers to "avoid commenting publicly on political developments" (Cook 2018). In addition, the rights activist

group Pussy Riot and other activists received attention during the event by protesting human rights and gay rights conditions in Russia (Allan 2018; Cook 2018; Daily Nation 2018; Gilpin 2018; Hutchinson 2018; O'Connor 2018; Stewart 2018; Stow and Hyatt 2018; The Telegraph 2018b; Withnall 2018).

The bottom line of media narratives was based on Russia's rather lenient policy towards discrimination and that "Russia remains a difficult and dangerous place for sexual minorities" (Bhat 2018). Newspaper articles did feature Russia's decriminalization of same-sex relationships in 1993 (Armstrong 2018a; Bhatt 2018; Mavadiya 2018; Morris 2018; The Mirror 2018). However, it was emphasized that not only the Russian policies are rather homophobic but also the public attitude towards gays is deprecatory (Atkin 2018b; Bhatt 2018; Carroll 2018a; Kumka 2018; Robertson 2018; The Mirror 2018; Youell 2018). The combination of homophobic sentiments on state-level but also in civil society are detrimental to a country's image and its soft power, especially during an event that typically promotes inclusivity, openness and hospitality.

Unfortunately, multiple reports on Russian hooligans threatening gay fans, and particularly gay British fans, contributed further to the homophobic narratives surrounding this Russian sports mega event. The fear-mongering incident before the World Cup of "Russian ultras Roman Sheykin and Nikita Lysenko [killing] two gay men" (Ikonen 2018) left the media and the global civil society outraged. Clearly, this was evidence enough for the international media to declare Russia as textbook human rights violator. The objection that this was indeed just one incident perpetrated by two individuals of the ostracized hooligan scene was quickly dismissed. Events like these suffice to equal out otherwise positive narratives due to their severity as well as their newsworthiness.

Next to the homophobic narrative, news stories about rights activism and voicing regime-critical views in Russia during the "most politically charged ever" World Cup populated international media (Carroll 2018b). The media catered to the fact that Russia is still a country with political prisoners like Pussy Riot activist Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Carroll 2018b; Carroll 2018c; O'Connor 2018; Kumka 2018; Kurmanaev 2018; Stewart 2018; The Telegraph 2018a). Four other members of Pussy Riot were detained for invading the pitch in the World Cup final. The pitch invasion was a sign of "protest aimed at ending illegal arrests of protesters

and to allow political competition in Russia.” (Daily News and Analysis 2018). Pussy Riot received first public attention for protesting inside a cathedral in Moscow in 2012. Not only was Russia’s behavior towards its own people and domestic rights activist groups condemned but also its hostility towards British human rights activist Peter Tatchell who was arrested before the World Cup for protesting LGBT rights in Russia (Armstrong 2018b; Atkin 2018a; Cook 2018; Hardman 2018; Hodge 2018; Nevett 2018; Robertson 2018). Rights activism in the form of Pussy Riot and Peter Tatchell used the platform of the 2018 FIFA World Cup and shone a very negative light on Putin and the Russian government to reveal its human rights failures. The human rights narrative of the media portrayed Russia as a country with systemic homophobia and societal homophobia where political activism against the state is a very dangerous path to chose and political opposition is held to a minimum.

#### **5.2.4 Image and Reputation Narrative**

The narrative of Russia’s image before, during and after the World Cup was tainted with relativizations. Even though most media called Russia’s 2018 FIFA World Cup a successful sports mega event and did praise Russia’s hosting qualities which was arguably accredited to Russian culture instead of governmental intent, such statements were almost exclusively preceded or followed by Russia’s otherwise bad international image or general doubts of Russia’s hosting suitability (Atkin 2018a; Atkin 2018c; Samuel 2018; South China Morning Post 2018; The Business Times 2018; The Sydney Morning Herald 2018; Withers 2018). It appears as though the media spread intentional skepticism to its audience. Thus, Russia had a tough and unfavorable standing in the media from the beginning. Again, soft power is fragile and small infringements can have a detrimental impact as did presenting commendations in a skeptical fashion. Not only did the media invoke skepticism to assessing the event’s legacy but it also questioned the integrity of Russia’s intentions to host the World Cup (Atkin 2018b; Atkin 2018c, O’Grady 2018; The Financial Express 2018). Here, commendations were presented as playing into the hands of Kremlin propaganda.

Another factor that contributed to Russia’s negative image and bad reputation as portrayed by the media was Russia’s President Vladimir Putin himself. Since the end of the Cold War, Putin has become the Russian figure of identification and an immediate association of the persona Putin has become inseparable with Russian politics and Russia’s international image. Individual

incidents only including Putin but not Russia as a whole per se reflect on Russia because he is a Russian icon. Arguably, if Putin is mentioned by the media, a connection to Russia is inevitable due to Russia and Russian politics being projected as one-man show evolving around Putin. While Putin is clearly not representative of the entirety of Russia, he still is their most recognizable representative. Thus, narratives about Putin are easy to be mistaken as narratives about Russia and any bad characteristic of Putin reflect badly on Russia. This is certainly the case with Putin's past. For some, Putin is still the former KGB spy (Atkin 2018b; Hardman 2018) where "Putin's image of the 'strongman' president is underpinned by a nostalgia for the Soviet Union" (Jajeczyk 2018). Aside from his past, the media also highlighted the aforementioned amicable relationship to high-ranking FIFA officials of the likes of current FIFA President Infantino or former FIFA President Blatter (Atkin 2018b; Atkin 2018c; Hills 2018; Oliphant 2018; Panja 2018; Samuel 2018; The Citizen 2018a; The Sydney Morning Herald 2018; Wallace 2018). While relationships with high-ranking FIFA officials would have been interpreted as a casual maintenance of beneficial public relations to influential people before the FIFA corruption scandal, today's situation suggests otherwise. A connection to corrupt ex-officials and current officials of an organization that has only been recently heavily struggling with corruption in terms of media coverage and reporting is perceived as strong indication of Putin's involvement in the aforementioned corruption. Naturally, this does not only put Putin in a light of doubt but also reflects badly on Russia as a whole and affects its soft power negatively.

Further depletion of Russia's image and reputation through the media were to be found in individual reports. Atkin (2018b) described the false image of Russia and the supposedly friendly façade was only put up during the World Cup but afterwards fan zones are empty and show a different kind of Russia that corresponds much more to the cynic depiction of Russia as a bad boy that puts on a fake friendly face when around company. Similar to Sochi and the 2014 Winter Olympics, Russia was again accused of rounding-up and killing stray dogs in order to clean up the image of the country" (Gamp 2018). Russia's bad guy image was also to be observed in how UK senior officials boycotted the event by not attending because of "Moscow's alleged poisoning of a former spy with a nerve agent in England this year" (Kurmanaev 2018). While these reports were rather isolated cases, they do also contribute to negative narratives that the media ascribed to Russia.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations**

Media narratives of corruption, human rights violations and the overall portrayal of a ‘bad guy’ image were decisive in Russia’s inability to improve its soft power through hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup despite the premise of such a sports mega event to be highly beneficial to the host’s soft power. Soft power has become increasingly important for emerging and re-emerging states such as Russia to enhance public and international relations and to indicate readiness to other global actors for becoming a recognizable and integral part of the global economic and political landscape. On that account, it has become a trend among emerging states to host sports mega events. Sports mega events provide the host with great opportunities to increase its soft power. The host country engages with nation-branding and attempts to augment its image by promoting distinct domestic features such as values, culture, civil society or the overall state demeanor. The soft power benefits of sports mega events are said to follow the ultimate goal of increasing the host’s international prestige.

However, this rather naïve attitude towards sports mega events and their supposed soft power impacts mostly ignore the negative effects of sports mega events as well as soft disempowerment. Sports mega events have been criticized to be linked to issues of corruption, human rights violations or their environmental footprint. These effects can be detrimental to the legacy of an event and, therefore, to the soft power of the host. All the more so since soft disempowerment needs to be taken into account in the sense that soft power can have both positive as well as negative outcomes. Soft power is fragile by nature and even bagatelles can have a devastating effect. This is why the media has such an impactful role in sports mega events and their soft power effect on the host country, especially in the age of mass media and worldwide media accessibility. The media functions as referee for credibility and legitimacy between the host and the event as sources of soft power, and the public as receiver of soft power. This intermediary role gives the media the power the influence narratives about the event host as well as the public perception of the event itself. The media becomes particularly important for the image and message the host wants to convey to the outside world. It can be said that the success of a sports mega event and its ultimate soft power outcome for the host country rise and fall with their respective media narratives.

In the case of Russia and their hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, the negative impact of the media was evident. More specifically, negative media narratives are to be linked to the absence of a soft power increase for Russia in regard to hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup. The media framed Russia as corrupt, in violation of human rights and pandered to its generally accepted 'bad guy' image. While some did praise Russia's hosting qualities, such statements were immediately followed by relativizations that emphasized Russia's wrongdoings and internationally shared doubts of Russia as a suitable host. It is certainly difficult to perceive Russia as good host and the event as success when every respective commendation is put into perspective by mentioning Russia's level of corruption, its human rights violations, prohibition of rights activism and political opposition. The media portrayed Russia's corrupt nature through its involvement in the FIFA corruption scandal which resulted in Russia hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup in the first place and subsequently questioned the legitimacy of the whole event. Additionally, the media depicted Russia as corrupt system that tried to masquerade domestic concerns such as poverty and crime during the event to maintain a fake façade for the world but quickly dropped the masquerade once the event was over to once more display its systemic discrepancies. While environmental concerns about Russia and the event were rarely discussed, Russia's human rights violations played a crucial role for the media and tainted the overall picture of the event. Russia's soft power was further weakened as the media reported on the dangerous situation for domestic as well as foreign rights activists and highlighted once more the prohibition of political opposition. As can be seen, the media criticized heavily host Russia and its 2018 FIFA World Cup. Arguably, Russia's international reputation was unfavorable before the event. Academic literature suggests that Russia should have improved its soft power but the supposedly infallible soft power benefits of hosting a sports mega event failed to appear for Russia. However, negative narratives exposed Russia and further underlined how damaging the role of the media can be to the fragility of soft power.

This thesis contributed the linkage between media narratives and their role in determining the soft power outcome of a sports mega event for the host country to the academic discourse on sports mega events. The focus was on negative media narratives as identified in newspaper articles. Here, the scope of future research could be broadened to include social media sources as well. Additionally, the language scope could yield more insight as to how particular countries view sports mega events hosting by countries that have been criticized predominantly by the Global North. This constitutes a legitimate argument for the subjective nature of soft power.

Possibly, countries with authoritarian features or similar public diplomacy to Russia perceive human rights violations or corruption differently than the Global North and are attracted to Russia's conservative interpretation of soft power rather than repelled by Russia's soft power shortcomings.

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