

Political Mythmaking and the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi: the Russian Great Power Myth Meets the Olympic Games

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The Sochi Olympics is a project intimately bound up with the international image of Russia. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev have been framing the Games as a showcase of Russia's return to great power status. Taking its theoretical starting point in the concept of political myth, this paper investigates the interconnections between the Russian great power myth and the Olympic myth, and how the two are used in discourse about the Sochi Olympics. It is argued that Russian leaders use the Olympic myth to legitimize their great power ambitions, and dress up national interests in universalist and internationalist rhetorical garb.

Introducing Political Myth

Political myths are basically shared beliefs in a society (Bar-Tal 2000). Such myths provide meaning and common frames of reference, underpin shared identities and serve to confer popular legitimacy to political leaders who deliver in accordance with the myths (Esch 2010; della Sala 2010; McDonald 2010). In contradiction to the common, everyday usage of the term, the actual truth of a political myth is not relevant for determining its political potency (Bottici 2010). A successful political myth is simply *believed to be true* or is *acted upon as if it was believed to be true* by a substantial group of people.

By their very nature political myths are promoted by the powers that be (McDonald 2010). If successful, the myths become inscribed in political practices, rituals and institutions of different kinds, as well as prevailing beliefs and norms. In this process they become normalized and achieve a status of taken-for-grantedness, and thus often become shielded from critical scrutiny (della Sala 2010).

However, there is often a tug of war between the articulation of political myth from above and contending truth claims from below. Duncan Bell introduces the concept of mythscape, which he holds to be the 'temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples' memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly' (Bell 2003:66). Both the myths groomed by the authorities and potentially divergent myths from below compete in the mythscape.

Compellingly, Boer (2009) suggests that the political myth itself is ridden with inherent contradictions and may be challenged and subverted from within. If the powers that be do not deliver, myth itself can therefore serve to bring them down. In such a manner, the myth contains the seeds of its own destruction. On the other hand, however, what Boer describes as the 'cunning of the myth' may also serve to bring about the fiction of a completed truth. This is the aim to which many political leaders aspire; the current Russian ones certainly being no exception.

The Russian Great Power Myth

There is an intimate relationship between the belief that Russia is and will remain a great power with an influential say in global affairs, on the one hand, and Russian national identity, on the other (Lo 2002; Petersson 2013). Vladimir Putin expressed this link very clearly when he once said that either Russia will be great, or it will not be at all (Shevtsova 2003:175). On this occasion and many others, Putin deftly echoed a widespread popular sentiment, and articulated the powerful political myth of Russia as an eternal and preordained great power. In fact, not even in the years of seemingly endless economic and political downfall and demise during the Boris Yeltsin presidencies of the 1990s did the claims about Russia's eternal greatness disappear from political discourse.

During Vladimir Putin's first two presidencies the conjunctural developments with unprecedented universal price hikes in oil and gas helped to sustain Russia's speedy economic recovery. Thanks to this it became credible to argue a return to greatness, and Putin's popularity figures were consolidated at a high level. Evidently Putin came across as the leader who resurrected Russia to greatness, and was rewarded by the electorate.

However, the idea about the eternal Russian great power status is not the only myth impacting on contemporary Russian politics. There is also the influential story about the cyclically recurring Times of Troubles (*smuta*) in Russian history and contemporaneity (Solovei 2003). Seemingly, the two myths contradict each other, but their relationship is far more intricate than what an initial impression would appear to convey. There is a dynamic interplay between the two myths, as the one explains the shortcomings of the other (Petersson 2013). The two myths are dialectically intertwined and account for the fact that neither eternal, uncontested glory, nor bottomless defeat seem to be Russia's lot in history.

The paradigmatic Time of Troubles between 1598 and 1612/1613 was characterized by political disorder, chaos, and foreign occupation. The ascendancy of Mikhail Romanov to the throne of the tsars in 1613 marked the symbolic end of the Time of Troubles. The Romanov dynasty, founded by Mikhail, would of course later come to see Peter the Great as its most renowned descendant. During Peter's reign, Russia was made great again, feared due to its successful power projection in Europe, and respected because of its progress and economic gains. Peter has since come to symbolize the attainability of the Russian great power status, the enduring lesson of his time being that it, in spite of all odds, is possible for Russia to reach the highest pinnacles of international power, provided that the leaders are farsighted and bold enough and that the people is united and prepared to make great sacrifices.

The concept of *smuta* has travelled across the centuries and retained its importance in Russian politics (Solovei 2004). Periods of *smuta* are of course seen as deeply humiliating when they last, but their overcoming testify, according to the myth, to the moral stamina and strength of the Russian people, making up one of the essential characteristics marking Russia as a rightful great power. All that is needed is that a bold and resourceful leader appears in the nick of time, manages to gather the people around him to lead the country out of the crisis, end harmful foreign influence and make Russia great and respected again. Thus, in both the political myths, about the overcoming of *smuta* and the return of the great power, the strong leader and the formidable inherent power of the people (once it has become united) emerge as key ingredients.

We argue that during his first two presidential terms in office Vladimir Putin successfully managed to tap into the two myths. According to this imaginary, the latest occurrence of the *smuta* was the Yeltsin years of the 1990s, marked by Russia's deep economic crisis and its

dependence on loans and subsidies from Western powers. It was also the period of internal unrest and centrifugal tendencies, with the civil war with Chechnya as the most obvious example. When taking up his office Putin immediately declared that 'the state has to be strong, but it has become weak', and started to act accordingly. Concepts like 'dictatorship of the law' and the need for 'sovereign democracy' were launched by him, manifesting his ambition to strengthen order inside the Russian house, make Russia respected again, and show that Russia was its own master (Pettersson 2012). This program was apparently popular, and it earned him the reputation of being the ender of the smuta, and the person who restored Russia's greatness.

For a long time Putin was thus very deft at extracting domestic legitimacy from this basis. But the lingering question is then how long this situation will last. For how long will the two prevailing myths keep their hegemony? Following the political developments during the election years of 2011 and 2012 it would certainly seem as though their dominance has already passed their prime. Cracks are becoming ever more visible in the foundation of legitimacy so carefully crafted during the years of Putin's first two presidencies. Putin, now turned 60, may not come across as so resourceful and energetic anymore. But the Sochi Olympics might mean a renewed chance of displaying vigor and strength, and to project this image internally as well as externally.

The Russian Great Power Myth Meets the Olympic Games

Although the opposite is at times perfunctorily claimed, sports in general and the Olympic Games in particular are closely intertwined with politics. The language and symbolism used in connection to sports are, as Michael Billig (1995) argues, often directly imported from discourses of war: such as 'victory', 'defeat', 'fight', 'destroy'. The medals given to athletes and the celebrations when a national team returns home after a successful championship are reminiscent of war culture: the successful general returns home in triumph after having crushed his nation's enemies.

Russia is no exception when it comes to marrying sports with politics. After having since its establishment in 1922 refused to send athletes to any Olympic Games, the Soviet Union changed its attitude after WW2 and dispatched its first team ever to the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki. Before being granted permission to send Soviet athletes to the Helsinki Games, the Chairman of the government Committee on physical culture and sport had to send a note to Iosif Stalin, guaranteeing great success in the sports arenas (Rider/Wamsley 2012). Since then the performance of Soviet or Russian athletes in the Olympic Games, both their successes and failures, has been regarded as indicative of the status of the country on the global arena.

In Russian discourse, the connection between athletic successes and the power of the nation is thus often made. Also, the opposite has been true; the performance of Russian athletes at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver was generally regarded as a fiasco. While alluding to the great power concept the then President Dmitrii Medvedev stated that sport failures were felt more deeply by Russians than by other people:

To us sport is more than sport, and that is why we are so affected by the performance of our team. In other countries people watched television, turned it off and relaxed, but we discussed and were agonized for a month: who delivered, who did not deliver, who is to blame, how should they be punished and so forth. I have been reading a lot and generally, people are very emotional about this. But at the same time it isn't that bad, because it shows that we, as they say, excuse me for the pathos, in our spiritual constitution are a nation of winners (kremlin.ru 2010).

At the same occasion, president Medvedev emphasized the importance of decorating successful athletes with state awards, restoring a system of athletic training matching that which existed in Soviet days, putting the individual athlete in the 'epicentre of attention', making sure that those responsible for the Vancouver failure resign, and most importantly, to 'move forward and prepare for the 2014 Olympics' (ibid). In the field of sports Russia had to be led out of the crisis and restored to its rightful greatness.

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Ever since it was first initiated, the Sochi project has been very closely associated with Vladimir Putin, who has invested much political prestige in the successful running of the Games. Indicatively, Putin stated on one occasion:

We are preparing a major international event and celebration for the whole Russian nation. We cannot allow this celebration to be affected by any problems for even one Russian citizen. Problems are not permitted (sochi2014.com 2012b).

A recurrent theme in the official rhetoric about the Sochi Olympics is that this mega-event will unite and mobilize the Russians for a common cause. The storyline that all Russians will unite behind the Olympic project resonates well with the great power myth, and the great achievements that can be reached when the people unites behind a resourceful leader.

Moreover, it is often stressed that the Games will involve not only those in the Sochi region, but that it is a concern for every Russian citizen. The unity theme is often connected to various societal challenges, and a frequently expressed idea is that the national unity offered by Sochi-2014 will help Russia to overcome current hardships. In a 2011 interview, the head of the organizing committee Dmitrii Chernyshenko compared the Sochi Games to a ‘magic wand’, affecting all parts of society (sochi2014.com 2011a).

The theme of unity, fundamentally undergirding Russia’s greatness as a nation, is accompanied by a related motif: a story of ethnic and religious diversity and conviviality. Chernyshenko on another occasion said that the cultural program of Sochi-2014 is devoted to ‘preserve and multiply the unique cultural richness of Russia, and to involve all residents in a grand celebration (...), show the world the ‘patchwork’ of cultural traditions in our country’ (sochi2014.com 2011b). The patchwork theme alludes to multiculturalist and internationalist ideals which are important dimensions of the Olympic spirit. However, one can also see the resemblance with the Soviet-time rhetoric of a ‘friendship of peoples’ which was used to legitimize the incorporation and subsequent domination of different regions into the Soviet empire (cf. Petersson/Persson 2010).

Setting the stage for the Resurrection

The Sochi Games are depicted as key in the process of Russia regaining its former status and reputation on the international stage. In a 2007 poll by the Levada institute, asking Russians why they believe that Russia strives to organize the Olympic Games, the alternative ‘Hosting Olympic Games will raise our country’s international prestige’ was the most popular, chosen by 64% of the respondents (Levada Tsentr 2007). Former president Dmitrii Medvedev argued

that such a status boost is important in regard to other countries, but first and foremost to the Russians themselves:

I am confident that we will prove to the world and primarily to ourselves, that Sochi's victory in Guatemala was not by chance. It shows the power and strength of our country, our desire to win, our ability to create excellent conditions for hosting the Olympic Games, the hospitality of our people, our love for sports and our commitment to putting maximum effort into making the Sochi 2014 Games an unforgettable experience for our guests... (sochi2014.com 2012b).

In a similar vein, commenting on the successful Sochi bid, Putin remarked that the outcome was in itself an indication of Russia's 'power and might of our country, of our desire to win' (Alekseyeva 2012:7). Thus, the Sochi Winter Games seem slated to provide a stage for the delivery of the message that Russia is back as a great power to be reckoned with. Somewhat later, Putin commented on a visit by the IOC to Sochi, during which the delegation was allegedly impressed by the speed of the construction of the Olympic facilities:

I was very pleased by their statement when they left after a recent inspection (...). They said: "Now we have seen the full power of the Russian state!" – This is a unique Olympic project, continued the prime minister. – Because the things we are doing, we do from scratch, on the empty ground, from a blank sheet. It is expensive. But, on the other hand, it gives us a unique chance to make everything on the basis of the most modern and latest technologies... (sochi2014.com, 2010).

Clearly, the storyline is that Sochi-2014 will contribute to the return of economic prosperity in the Russian south and – above all – the restoration of Russia's international status. All these components harmonize with the ideals of progress and perfection inherent in Olympism, but also fit neatly into the great power myth and the myth about the eventual overcoming of the smuta troubling Russia during the 1990s.

Concluding Remarks

The concept of political myth denotes a powerful theoretical tool of analysis. It is useful in many domains of the political, not only explicit domestic and foreign policy practices, but also everyday uses of politics and the intersection between sports and politics. Our analysis has borne this out, and has also suggested ways that official Russia, during Vladimir Putin's

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third presidency, will try to exploit the upcoming Sochi Olympics to project its great power position internally and in relation to the external world.

For Putin personally, given his dwindling position of legitimacy, the 2014 Olympics might constitute the last chance to resurrect his image of energy, vigor and resourcefulness. After a presidential race marked by the glaring absence of credible oppositional candidates it seems unlikely that a future candidate would emerge sometime soon to challenge Putin on his home turf, the one of the great power myth and the risk for a return of smuta. What might however realistically emerge from the bottom and up, if it has not already done so, is a counter-myth craving attention in the mythscape, arguing that Russia under Putin is facing a new period of stagnation, in the likeness of what took place in the Soviet Union during the 1980s (Petersson 2012).

Such a myth would rather be due to failures by the powers that be than to the forceful emergence of consistent and compelling counter-myths from below. Indeed, like it was argued in the beginning of the paper, it is often from the myth itself that the most formidable challenges occur. If those in power do not deliver what they have committed to do, acting as self-professed impersonators of the myth, the political myths initially legitimating their incumbency may well turn against their political masters. This certainly goes also for the Russian great power myth. For almost a decade there was considerable success projecting the image of the strong President (i.e. Putin) heading a state firmly set on its path towards resurrection of Russia's old great power status. If this imagery would turn out not to hold, if externally projected power and domestic order start to falter, the judgment by the electorate is likely to be harsh. This could certainly prompt a development where more elaborate counter-myths from below could bring home the message that Putin's hegemonic hold on power is history.

On the other hand, for Putin and his team the Sochi Olympics might of course denote a chance of disproving such scenarios, and thus successfully project the image of a completed truth. It seems likely that going for such an option is an opportunity that Putin cannot afford to miss. By taking actions to promote Russia's power and prestige abroad and to reinforce law, order and hierarchical control at home, political scores can maybe still be won by Putin to secure a basis of legitimacy. The Sochi Olympics might therefore serve to shore up his personal power and international prestige, but for the prospects of democratic gains in Russia

in general and in the Russian parts of the Caucasus in particular, this might turn out to be a costly deal.

It will not be for the first time that the Olympic Games are used, or even misused or hijacked, for political purposes, and it will certainly not be the last. The familiar motto of 'citius, altius, fortius' (stronger, higher, faster) will continue to ring during future Olympic games, but one might of course wonder where the focus on fair competition on the level of individual athletes went to. Something seems to have gotten lost along the way.

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