

# **“Fanatic Energy in the Wrong Places”: Potemkin Neoliberalism and Domestic Soft Power in the 2018 Men’s Football World Cup in Russia**

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## **SUMMARY**

This thesis uses the 2018 World Cup in Russia to engage with the processes of neoliberal restructuring and the conception of soft power. Based on a comparison of the host cities of Ekaterinburg and Volgograd, it unpacks the World Cup at multiple scales of analysis and offers a light and revisable framework for understanding mega-events. Grounded in primary qualitative and secondary documentary data, the thesis demonstrates multiple dimensions of Potemkinism in the articulation of this World Cup. Inspired by but moving beyond traditional post-colonial thought, it attempts to make good on the premise of theorizing from anywhere, making a case for the relatively invisible cities of the Global East in a landscape of urban theory dominated by the hegemonic North or the subaltern South. This ambition represents the overall frame for the thesis, while the work itself focuses more specifically on the planning and impacts of hosting the World Cup.

This work is composed of two central thrusts. Within an understanding of mega-events as fundamentally urban events, the first thrust explores hosting as the vanguard of neoliberal restructuring, one of the traditional means of making sense of mega-events. In this view, bidding and hosting are seen as a strategy for inter-urban competition and a ploy to attract increased flows of tourists and capital. This is understood as one of the markers of a shift to a more entrepreneurial mode of urban governance and is part of wider global political economic restructuring that de-emphasizes the national in favor of regional or municipal scales. Using Neil Brenner’s conceptualization of rescaled competition state regimes, this part of the thesis explores how rescaling worked on the ground in Russia and demonstrates that these processes of neoliberalization are not as easily understood as they might first appear. Instead, what is revealed in the articulation of the Russian World Cup is a seemingly paradoxical combination of national state-led projects to develop the peripheries in regionally and municipally specific ways, for the purposes of interurban differentiation and competition. The thesis proposes the notion of Potemkin neoliberalism to make sense of these seeming paradoxes and, further, traces some of the uneven developments within the host cities. This is framed within an emphasis on the superficial rather than the substantive, meaning an attention towards

aesthetics and appearance rather than on structural reforms and durable infrastructural improvements.

The second thrust investigates Joseph Nye's notion of soft power, which is another traditional way of understanding the rationales for hosting mega-events. Soft power analyses typically frame hosting through the lens of foreign policy, a view that tends to ignore the domestic component entirely. Separate from this, some mega-event studies focus on hosting as a strategy for nation- or identity building, but typically these do not situate this domestic concern within the conceptual apparatus of soft power. Combining these two approaches, this thesis takes the Russian World Cup as a primarily domestic affair, both to develop the urban peripheries (as demonstrated in the first thrust), and to inculcate certain soft power narratives within the domestic population. Conceptualizing the narrative project as soft power allows a tracing of each element in the soft power equation: narrative generation, the mechanisms of distribution, and the reception (or lack thereof) among host city residents. This is presented as discursive Potemkinism, whereby a certain set of narratives were promoted as the official way to understand the mega-event, though with little attention to the realities underneath. Finally, the thesis explores the final element in the soft power equation – the impacts on host city residents – through an attention to the micro level of everyday life. In this, it engages with de Certeau and Lefebvre to create a spectrum of tactics employed by residents to disalienate themselves by various degrees from World Cup developments. The thesis emphasizes the individual and the quotidian to offer a more nuanced, human level approach to understanding mega-event-led urban development.

Situated in a relational comparative urbanism that valorizes the Global East, these two thrusts represent the core contributions of this monograph. Overall, the thesis presents an investigation of the 2018 men's Football World Cup that takes stock of global political economic processes, Russian national state spatial strategies, uneven municipal developments, the creation and distribution of soft power narratives to the domestic audience, and the adoption, reworking, or outright refusal of those narratives among host city residents.