

Sports Mega-events and the Resilient Transformation of Post-Socialist Cities

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Abstract

A strong tradition of urban research explores the political economy of major global sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups. Such sporting mega-events are acknowledged in geographical literature as having a major impact on urban restructuring. Many authors argue that neoliberal regimes have bundled such events with entrepreneurial spatial strategies to restructure the material and discursive practices of affected cities and regions in inherently problematic ways. While justified as important vehicles for urban regeneration, regional development, and status elevation, mega-events often impose large burden on public budget and reduce funds for important social expenditures, facilitate the privatisation of public space and public services, create conditions for socio-spatial polarisation, and lead to the militarization of urban space due to security measures. This project will consider such contradictory experiences specifically in relation to post-socialist cities. A number of major international sporting events are to be hosted in Russia and its neighbouring states in the coming decade – most notably, the UEFA EURO 2012 (Poland and Ukraine), the 2013 Universiade (Kazan, Russia), the 2014 Winter Olympics (Sochi, Russia), and the 2018 FIFA World Cup (a number of cities in Russia). The levels of investment allocated for the preparation to some of these events are unprecedented and so is the scale of physical and social changes in the affected cities and regions. It is proposed that the project will look at one or several of these events and explore aspects of the political economy of event-driven urban restructuring. The candidate would be expected to develop their own research proposal around this project based on their own expertise and interest. Given the geographic focus of the project, it is expected that the candidate will have appropriate language skills.

Research Rationale and Objectives

A strong tradition of urban research explores the political economy of major global sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and World Cups. Many authors argue that neoliberal regimes have bundled such events with entrepreneurial spatial strategies to restructure the material and discursive practices of affected cities and regions in inherently problematic ways. While justified as important vehicles for urban regeneration, regional development, and status elevation, mega-events often impose large burden on public budget and reduce funds for important social expenditures, facilitate the privatisation of public space and public services, create conditions for socio-spatial polarisation, and lead to the militarization of urban space through security measures. For example, the International Olympic Committee has chosen the city of Sochi in Russia as the host of the 2014 Winter Olympics and Paralympics; following FIFA's decision to appoint Russia as the host nation of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Sochi will also be one of the main locations for the World Cup's matches. It has also been argued that such events, coupled with neoliberal urban strategy, lay bare or amplify many social contradictions and spatial contestations. However, the impacts of the Olympic and World Cup games are likely to be far beyond the local city, affecting the wider urban settings – including, for example, limiting national funds available for other cities or solving social problems, increased levels of uneven regional development, intensification of inter-city competition for public and private investment.

The proposed research project will be the first academic exploration of the relevance of these debates in the context of Russia or other post-soviet/transition states, preparing for the abovementioned games. It will examine the role that the games play for the reorganisation of the metropolitan space in particular and for the transformation of urban political economy more

generally – by assessing the socio-economic, planning and policy impacts of national and local preparations for these games. The study would link the more general debates on neoliberalism, sporting mega events, and post-socialist transition with concrete experiences of urban transformation. The research will aim to understand the role that sports mega-events play for the reorganisation of the metropolitan space and for urban political economy in transition economies and surrounding states more generally. The objectives include:

- To analyse the scope of urban change and redevelopment as a result of hosting the games.
- To determine who is likely to gain and lose from the urban redevelopment processes and how these conditions affect social, economic and political tensions, both locally and nationally.
- To critically evaluate the role of public government and to examine political discourses, both locally and nationally, justifying particular programmes and strategies associated with mega events.

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