

Euro 2012: the Janus-Faced Nature of Hosting Sports Mega-Events

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Avery Brundage, the former President of the International Olympic Committee, famously stated over 50 years ago that sport transcends politics and the former has no place in the dealings of the latter. Sport has always been inextricably bound up with politics, but nowadays the hosting of sports mega-events has become competitive in its own right, as potential hosts weigh up the benefits against the substantial costs of putting on such occasions. The recent trend of awarding major tournaments to countries other than advanced capitalist states throws up a number of interesting questions: Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the world governing body of football, would insist that such 'new lands' (Sepp Blatter) as Qatar (World Cup, 2018), Russia (World Cup, 2022) and, presumably, Poland/Ukraine (Euro 2012) will be fast-tracked in their efforts to become fully-fledged democracies and will gain substantially from hosting the events. The hosts themselves will, at the very least, expect these events to showcase their nations, improve their national image abroad, and provide a significant boost in inbound tourism.



The first question to pose is who decides which city/country can host a sports mega-event and on what basis is such a decision made? The short answer is that the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), who chose Poland and Ukraine to host the Euro 2012, are clearly following the lead set by organisations that are neither accountable nor transparent: FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Some would argue that undemocratic organisations selecting regimes that have an unproven record of democratic governance (e.g. China, Qatar and Russia) is perhaps not the best method to emulate.

The second question to consider is whether it is really in the interest of fledgling democratic states to stage major sports events and whether they will obtain the key benefits they hope for? First, no other events attract more global media – and scrutiny – than sports events. Consider the case of the Delhi Commonwealth Games (CG) in 2010. The intense focus of the world's media was partly to blame for quashing India's ambitions of hosting an Olympics, after the debacle surrounding the preparations for the CG. Images of crumbling building work, wild monkeys, and Dengue fever were beamed across the world. Ukraine has similarly faced an unprecedented amount of media scrutiny as co-host of the forthcoming Euro 2012 championship. The recent Panorama exposé on racism among Ukrainian football fans has started a fierce debate about whether England's multi-ethnic supporters should heed former England player Sol Campbell's warning to stay at home. Further media scrutiny has focused on the treatment of the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, who is currently languishing in jail on charges many believe are 'trumped up'.

Second, of the Euro 2012 co-hosts, it is Ukraine that appears to be attracting the kind of attention that can lead to a deterioration of their image abroad, rather than the positive boost they were hoping for. The constant stream of bad press, the threats of boycotts, and questions over the democratic legitimacy of the incumbent regime, are worrying. As are the concerns around racism among a population who have previously lived under dictatorial conditions and, like many former communist states, experienced little multiculturalism in their society.

This leads on to inbound tourism both during, but crucially, beyond the period of the tournament. Expected levels of inbound tourism are notoriously over-estimated around sports events – the negative media coverage of the past few months, the outspoken Campbell and fears of racist attacks are likely to impact on the rates of tourism, especially to the Ukraine, which will, of course, impact on the hoped-for economic return on their state's estimated \$14 billion investment. Crucially, as Germany found during the FIFA World Cup in 2006, the most important factor in improving a state's image – apart from a trouble-free event – is to have people visit your country, return home happy and spread the word.

Perhaps states considering bidding for a sports mega-event ought to consider hosting as a double-edged sword, rather than a guaranteed return on investment and a short-cut to a modern, democratic state.

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