

### **World Cup in Russia: Local Mediations of Global Mega-Events**

Recently, global sporting events attracted attention of scholars, who have considered their political and economic effects. My paper, based on ethnographic research, media analysis, and interviews, considers how individuals living in Russian city-hosts experienced and interpreted 2018 FIFA World Cup. I argue that personal reactions to the World Cup are affected by media narratives, but also by individuals' experiences of transformed urban landscapes and long-lasting engagements with the world of international football. I focus on three different aspects of individuals' reactions to the World Cup: discussions of championship's infrastructure as indicative of Russia's modernity, orientation to the gaze of international spectators and tourists within Russia, and personal engagements with the championship through fandom, social relations, and professional activities. I show that global events, such as the World Cup, contribute to nationalism, but also create novel types of transnational spectatorship. An analysis of global sporting events can help us to understand how transnational practices, images, and narratives are translated in local contexts. In Russia's political context, individuals interpret World Cup as an opportunity to assert their country's modernity, get a respite from challenging socio-economic realities and international censure, affirm social relations and national identities, and experience an unprecedented connection to transnational publics.

My paper aims to contribute to the field of study of transnationalism by focusing on the way major global sporting events are mediated, interpreted, and narrated locally. Scholars of

anthropology have turned their attention to the study of globalization, transnational processes, and transnational identities. While some scholars have critiqued the very idea of globalization as masking the cyclical nature of capitalist economic processes (Friedman 2007), other anthropologists examined the ways in which transnationalism engenders new identities, even as it reinforces inequality and brings about new patterns of exclusion (Hannerz 2007, Glick Shiller 2007). One of the key challenges in transnational studies is finding novel ways to investigate global processes without resorting to celebratory, vague, and often reifying terminology of flows, mobility, and hybridity. In my work, I build on scholarship of globalization and transnational processes that points to the dangers of treating flows and mobility as disconnected, ephemeral phenomena and attempt to “ground” the study of transnational processes (Inda and Rosaldo 2008; Tsing 2005).

Engagements with global processes should not be equated with transnational identities. Glick Schiller, for example, differentiates between transnational ways of belonging and transnational ways of being (Glick Schiller 2007: 458). Transnational ways of being can include lives lived across borders, but can also include individuals whose family relations, work experiences, or engagement with information take place within transnational social fields. In this way, engagement with global mega-events, such as the World Cup, would constitute one way of transnational being and interaction with transnational flows of information, cultural production, finances, and people. However, Schiller distinguishes these practices from transnational ways of belonging – the ways in which individuals translate and frame their transnational practices into transnational identity politics. However, participation in transnational processes does not always lead to transnational identities and can actually reinforce locally-rooted identities or nationalist practices (Hannerz 2007; Holmes 2000). Anthropologists of media also remind us that

transnational media projects that aim to create new publics and identities often operate on a faulty premise of the social potency of media consumption in fostering belonging, contrary to Anderson's well-known argument about imagined communities (Anderson 1991; Stankewicz 2017). Transnational belonging can take different forms, but an analysis of identity-making needs to consider how individuals interpret and narrate their engagements with global processes. Most studies of transnational belonging and media spectatorship focus on migrants and diasporic networks, examining the worlds of individuals whose social and political identities are at least partially defined by mobility (Glick Shiller and Fouron 2002; Ong 1999). I approach the study of transnational being and belonging through the lens of a global mega-event, focusing on the ways in which local residents interpret and make sense of this cultural phenomenon.

Mega-events, like the World Cup, with their fusion of global and nationalistic imagery, present a fascinating case study of transnational processes, as well as experiences of spectatorship and media consumption. Scholarship on mega-events, primarily rooted in sociology of sports, have traditionally focused on the Olympic games, but recently scholarship turned to other sporting events, including World Cup. Media events provide "cultural resources for reflecting upon identity and enacting agency" (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006: 1), and serve as important indicators of nations' orientations to global society. National governments that organize global sports competitions often hope that these events will boost patriotism, generate economic development, elevate their country's geopolitical significance, and promote future tourism (Horne 2012; Horne and Manzereiter 2006). Increasing importance of global mega-events have been attributed to the following factors: developments in the technologies of mass communications that enable broadcasts to reach global audience and encourage competition for broadcast rights; formation of the alliance among sports, media, and businesses; and the

perception of the value of such events for promotion of regions and cities (Horne and Manzreiter 2006). The effects of such events are often mixed, combining high costs with economic developments in some fields. Horne and Manzreiter argue that sports became a key part of “economies of signs and space” in late capitalism. The scholarship on international sports events considers economic, social, and environmental effects of such events, as well as athletes’ and tourists’ experiences of the events and the identities that these experiences engender (Hayes and Karamichas 2012; Besnier and Brownell 2012). My paper focuses on the ways in which individuals living in host cities experience local and global processes linked to the World Cup.

As part of my research, I analyzed various media channels and their coverage of the World Cup, both in mainstream publications and TV channels, as well as in oppositional media. I also conducted four weeks of field work in Russia and in Lithuania, before and during World Cup in the summers of 2017 and 2018. I have interviewed individuals in Kaliningrad, Moscow, Nizhnyii Novgorod, and Samara. In addition, I conducted interviews with individuals in Vilnius, and via vyber with individuals in St. Petersburg and Moscow. While my primary target group was individuals who lived in World Cup host cities, I have also interviewed individuals who traveled to see the World Cup as spectators or as journalists. I used a snowball method of recruiting participants. I conducted recorded interviews (with an exception of two cases, when the interviewees opted out of a recorded interview, and I took notes by hand). I also conducted participatory observation fieldwork, watching games in various locations and observing public events, such as FIFA fan zone celebrations, as well as attending two games at the stadium. The goal of my semi-formal interviews and observations was to track how individuals make sense of the experience of World Cup and how they narrate their own identities and orientation to both national and global dimensions of this event.

It is difficult to argue against local and global significance of the World Cup, even based on the spectatorship of the event itself. 2018 World Cup was very popular with viewers both globally and locally (The Conversation 2019; Channel One Russia 2019) According to the numbers provided by the first Russian channel, which had the rights to most of the games, 71% of Russian residents watched the 27 live games that were broadcast. The most watched game was Russia-Croatia (quarter-final), which was watched by 34% of the population, 73% of the viewers watched it at home, and the rest watched it at dachas, in bars, and in fan zones. Many watched the games on their phones, tablets, and other devices. Interestingly, 45% of the viewers were women. The biggest demographic group of viewers was 25-34 year-old men. While World Cup games attracted large audiences in Russia and internationally, it provoked heated discussions about its political and economic implications in Russia's political context.

Local context adds new dimensions to the analysis of mega-events and transnational spectatorship. Another global sporting project, Olympics, performed a number of societal functions, enabling Russia's president Putin's to distribute financial resources and solidify alliances with key political figures and oligarchs, organize security forces, tighten security, and crack-down on certain nongovernmental organizations (Orttung and Zhemukhov 2017). World Cup was organized in the context of hybrid war in Crimea, ensuing geopolitical tensions, sanctions, and Skripal poisoning. There was uncertainty whether the event will take place and, if it does, whether it will be financially successful and what effects it will have on the Russian government. Russian national media, as well as some foreign sources, cited the World Cup as an unmitigated success, linking it to the country's modernity and development. While state media celebrated World Cup as a major national achievement, many prominent journalists and dissidents critical of Putin's regime criticized Russian citizens' jubilation about the

championship and the advancement of the Russia's national team. Media outlets critical of Putin's regime, such as Echo Moskvy and Dozhd, debated whether seemingly ubiquitous celebration of the Championship and national team's advancement can ever be apolitical. Some prominent dissident journalists and pundits argued that watching World Cup implies complicity with the regime and support of its policies. Did the event actually help to boost Russian nationalism and booster the popularity of the regime? The answer to this question is not immediately clear and is linked to the ways in which individuals have experience this transnational event.

Similarly, it is difficult to conduct a clear economic cost-benefit analysis of the World Cup. Any global mega-event raises significant questions about its costs and benefits. The cost of Russian World Cup was about twelve billion dollars. A significant amount of this budget was invested in infrastructure, both stadiums and other constructions, such as roads and metro stations. However, some of the critics of global sporting events argue that this infrastructure provides short-term economic boost and replaced more important and necessarily spending in the realms of medical and educational infrastructure (Shipway and Fyall 2012). This criticism is based on the assumption, which is difficult to test, that these funds would have been allocated in these spheres if the World Cup would not take place in Russia. Megaevents also bring a hope of a both short-term and long-term boost in tourism. While the World Cup did host one million foreign visitors and was a success from the point of view of 2018 tourism, yet again, it is difficult to know whether it is a short-term or long-term effect (Reynard 2018). Whether infrastructure development will continue to have a positive effect in economic and sports realms is a question that needs to be considered in long-term frames, however, next I turn to the ways in which individuals made sense of and interpreted urban construction for World Cup 2018.

Global sporting events, with their transformations of infrastructure, inflows of foreign tourists, and global spectatorship, enable hosting governments to position their country as a modern and respectable member of the international community. How did individuals react to these changes? Global events are often specifically oriented toward the future, indexed by modern infrastructure and aspirations towards state-of-the-art stadiums. My interviewees aligned with this chronotope of global events in their narratives, where they described development of urban infrastructure as indexing progress (Bakhtin 1981). While many interviewees were in awe of various infrastructural changes, most emphasized that World Cup expedited the transformations that would eventually happen. For example, Irina, a woman from Nizhnyi Novgorod, in her mid-sixties, admired the new river promenade built in time for the World Cup. It would have been built anyway, but the World Cup has expedited the process, she claimed. Irina recounted a number of other improvements that the city government had to implement before the championship. In Nizhnyi Novgorod, river promenade was mentioned by many others in a positive light.

Even in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which are no strangers to international events, foreign visitors, and development of infrastructure, local residents noted many new projects linked to and expedited by the World Cup. Individuals would again emphasize that the World Cup expedited the construction that was planned anyway. Residents of St. Petersburg and Moscow emphasized that there was already a high level of development in their cities, but the championship brought about some of the renovations to fruition earlier than planned. Individuals especially pointed out the new Moscow Central Circle train was expedited by the World Cup. For example, Artiom, a man in his 20s, who lives in St. Petersburg said that the “city underwent certain transformations.” He noted two new stations, one of which was next to the stadium, that

were opened sooner than planned on the green subway line. Another respondent, Olga, said that Moscow was not so much rebuilt, as certain aspects were highlighted. A forty-year old man, Oleg, from Nizhnii said: “When they announced that Russia will host World Cup, of course, when we saw some movement right away, they opened a new station, started repairing the roads.” Thus, the World Cup was portrayed as a national financial project that brought resources to some key areas, especially outside of the center, expedited by the pressure of international attention.

The World Cup was often portrayed as an event that stimulate future development, especially in the realm of sports. Not surprisingly, most individuals focused their discussion on new or renovated stadiums. There was much discussion of the features and creativity of the stadiums. They were discussed as modern buildings signaling Russia’s belonging to the modernity. My interviewees noted the fears that they would not be used enough, but hoped that it would not be the case. A few also expressed hope in the new gym centers for young people, FOK (which also allowed older people to use them for free during certain hours). They hoped that this infrastructure would help to develop football in Russia. Not everyone was equally impressed and accepted the timeline of progress towards modernity and success in football. Some individuals whom I have met during my stay in Russia seemed unimpressed and uninterested by World Cup and corresponding changes. Some would disdainfully note that only the arrival of foreigners motivated the authorities to finally invest in the local infrastructure, while others, like one taxi driver in Nizhnyii Novgorod, noted dryly that the roads were a disaster before the World Cup and will get back to the same state after the championship.

It is difficult to disentangle individuals’ admiration of infrastructure with their reaction to the gaze of foreigners and reflection about the modernity of Russia in comparison to other

countries. Thus, most of my interviewees told me that they are proud that their country did not embarrass itself in the international realm and has produced a high-quality championship, with well-built stadiums, friendly fans, and interesting games. I heard the following phrase from multiple people: “They will see that there no bears on Russian streets.” The phrase was pronounced only half-jokingly, and a few people earnestly argued that this is the perception of the backwardness of Russia that many foreigners actually had. This tired trope of bear on the streets conjures folk stereotypes of Russia but also highlights presumed backwardness and lack of urban development in Russia – the perception that the Championship was trying to counter. Russian residents seemed to be especially frustrated with the negative coverage of Russia in foreign media. Some of them mentioned that the Skripal poisoning incident was framed and a part of larger anti-Russia propaganda. Others were quick to defend Putin against negative perceptions in the West. My interviewees were especially eager to emphasize that foreigners will now see how friendly Russians are and will be able to see that there are no major conflicts among soccer hooligans, as was predicted by the British media, for example. Young people cited their own consumption of British and other foreign media as evidence of what they perceived as exceedingly negative coverage of Russia. Thus, infrastructure and logistics of the Championship took on an important role as evidence for positive aspects of Russia as a country, contributing to nationalist sentiments explicitly oriented towards international perceptions. A possible argument is that this concern was itself mediated by Russian state media emphasis on hostility of “Western” press to Russia.

Social platforms and newly important media such as youtube became arena for reflecting on international perceptions of World Cup and Russia, in general. For example, people seemed to take pleasure in sharing the reactions of foreign tourists to their visit. Stories of reactions of

positive reactions of foreigners were circulated and turned into memes. For example, a few individuals who knew I was researching the World Cup sent me a youtube video of British father and son recounting their experiences in Russia – I saw the same video circulating on various social platforms. The enthusiasm of the father-son duo in the video, who were exuberant about their stay in Russia, got a lot of attention from the Russians who took it as an indication of the reaction of foreign fans to Russia and vindication of naysayers who forecasted the Championship’s failure. World Cup made this especially explicit, but the gaze of the other/foreigner is a frequent online genre that reflects considerable interest in turning the camera at the foreigner to observe their reaction to Russian phenomena. Thus, another example of this genre in a different format is a collection of contemporary Russian pop and rap music that former European football super stars are commenting on. Judging by success of such genres, – and my interviewees shared with me some of these videos as well – another interesting amalgam of the intersection of transnational and national orientations is this desire for an international gaze that assesses national features in a positive light, legitimating Russian modernity, creativity, and cultural forms.

During the time of the championship, Russia’s very space seemed to be transformed, becoming a more modern, pleasant, and international place. Thus, my interviewees noted many decorations, fan zones, and fests that became prominent in urban spaces. For example, when I asked Artiom if the Cup brought any inconveniences, he stated that to the contrary “facilities” (using the English) word brought benefits and made it more pleasant to walk on the streets. He also noted that in St. Petersburg many new bilingual Russian/English signs were established and public transport maps were updated, suggesting a more internationally accessible and scrutable urban landscape. In addition to urban development, my interviewees mentioned massive flows

of tourists through the country that seemed to have transformed Russia's vast space. Special trains with international fans were whisking international fans beyond the well-trodden paths into peripheral host cities. Trains with foreigners were faster than regular ones, as some Russians noted disdainfully, but the regular trains were full of international fans as well, with Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French languages heard throughout the trains. Even Muscovites, who are not easily impressed by international tourists, were still amazed by the diverse origins and exuberant mood of the foreign guests. One young woman from Moscow noted that they are used to seeing Chinese or European tourists, but it is more unusual to encounter Brazilians, Mexicans and Uruguayans, who were a loud and joyful presence in the Western central part of Moscow, where this young woman lived. As I was walking around Kremlin, a young couple in front of me noted all the different languages spoken around the Red Square: "It's cool. It's as if we are not in Moscow anymore." For cities such as Nizhnyii Novgorod, which is less of a touristic landmark than Moscow or St. Petersburg, the masses of foreign tourists were especially impressive and out-of-character, as locals looked on with amazement at Argentinians and Croatians engaged in song battles or Swedish fans reciting sporting chants on city streets. For many, this atmosphere contributed to a singular sensation of an international carnival and a rupture with a day-to-day reality.

In describing the World Cup as a site of exuberant celebration and out-of-the-ordinary spectacle – and a spectacle of both football and international fans – it must be noted that the championship was also a venue of work and volunteering for many individuals. Four of my respondents were in some ways engaged in the championship economy. One young man in early thirties was engaged in the building of a stadium in Samara. He faced difficulties getting his full payment, because of the scheme of work adopted by many construction firms that spring

up employ workers, go bankrupt, and refuse to pay their employees. Another forty-year old man in Nizhnyi was engaged in providing music entertainment at the Fan zone. A 45-or so old woman in Kaliningrad was the head of FIFA volunteers, while another young woman in her late twenties was one of the mangers of operation of the whole stadium. The latter recounted the professional development and fulfillment that the experience has brought her. She talked about the “bundle” of emotions of joy, apprehension, excitement, pride, etc. that were the result of her coordination of one of the stadiums, and will define her feelings for the rest of her life.

Engagement with the World Cup could add frustration to regular workers engaged in the construction of the stadium, but can also result in a new spiral of professional growth and can contribute to a fulfilling or cathartic experience of creative work and encounters with people from various countries. Thus, it is important to highlight the role in which the political economy of the World Cup also contributed to individual experiences and interpretations of the event.

However, individuals did not have to be involved in professional activities linked to the championship, in order to feel personally invested in the event. For individuals I talked to the Cup was the culmination of many years of following their favorite national teams, clubs, and players. Many carefully keep track of their favorite Russian and European leagues. For example, a number of individuals told me they follow German clubs, Spanish, British and/or Italian clubs. Many watch as many games as possible, but also follow various portals and online sports publications and forums. During the World Cup some people tried to watch all games – like the retired couple in Nizhnyi Novgorod, but most tried to catch the main games. The pleasure of spectatorship was amplified by the realization that the mega-stars of world football are suddenly in immediate proximity. The World Cup is perceived as rupture in regular life, a sort of carnival, where the players and fans from all over the world come to occupy Russian

locations. Thus, there were a number of stories in the media about football stars and fans from different locations incongruently roaming the streets of Russian cities. Often the memes would locate the national superstars such as Ronaldo and Messi in settings appropriate for working-class Russian citizens and not for world-famous legends. Some individuals have attended the newly built stadiums before the World Cup and could revel now in the knowledge that the same stadiums are now hosting major soccer stars. Yet again the pleasurable feeling of being the center of international football for a month contributed to an amalgam of national joy and transnational belonging.

One of the most significant pleasures of the World Cup was the unexpected success of the much-maligned Russian football team. It went surprisingly far – into the quarter finals – much further than most people anticipated. “It was a gift” said a young woman about the team’s performance. This fairy-tale like quality, Cinderella-like, story of the success of the Russian national team, was memorialized in a multitude of memes, as individuals recounted a mosaic of pride, amazement, joy, vindication, disbelief, and gratitude directed at the national team. Memes of players and the coach were circulated widely contributing to the sociability of individuals linked through the common media space of football matches and commentary in the geographic space of once-in-a-lifetime carnivalesque championship.

Finally, and linked to the unexpected joy of watching Russian national team advance, was the fulfillment of watching and discussing the games with others. Many watched at home on TV with their families or over their friends’, however, people also watched the games in bars and in fan zones. Others would watch the games in transit in metro or on their smart phones. One of my respondents, Anton, described to me the excitement of watching the games in Moscow’s peripheral districts, where a Russian goal would be met with roaring screams and

jubilant from most windows of the high-rises. Another key part of the experience was the on-going commentary about the game via various social platforms and technologies. A young woman recalled how she was not feeling well and was slept, thus missing one of the Russia's victories. She was woken up by multiple text messages from various texting work and friends' groups, as well as friends and family, all of whom rejoiced in Russia's victory, sending her texts "Hooray! We won!" as well as various memes and celebratory images. While older people would also mention conversations about football on the phone and reading of the online forums, young people would especially emphasize the role of social media and sharing of information, pictures, and discussions of the games. In this way, the games play a key role in promoting the pleasure and creativity of online social interactions, fostering local social relations through the discussion of the major transnational event.

Not everyone embraced the World Cup, with its ostentatious urban construction, celebrations of international friendship, and sociality cemented by discussions of games. There was significant criticism as well, and one of the most prominent rappers, Face, in his new album, expressed the sentiment that the World Cup could be perceived as just another instance of corruption by residents of peripheral areas. Some of my interviewees focused on the event's negative aspects as well: an animal rights activist was dismayed by the rumored cleaning up of street dogs before the championship in host cities, while a young man was angered that he was not fully compensated for his electric work on the stadium's construction. A number of people were outraged by the policies that were implemented in the ruckus of the World Cup – the raise of the VAT tax and the pension reform, that increased the pension age. Many felt that it was an especially calculating and callous move by the government to implement such reforms during the World Cup. Indeed, after the World Cup, there were a number of protests against the reforms,

and Putin's ratings decreased significantly (Kolesnikov 2018). However, most individuals were quick to portray the championship as an apolitical event that allowed people to rest from politics and enjoy the national victory and the carnivalesque and transnational nature of the event.

Transnationalism fostered by this mega-event is based on the conception of the world divided into culturally distinct nations, visibly represented by multi-colored shirts of athletes and fans. It is a transnationalism that is still rooted in cultural difference, which is made more pleasurable due to the atmosphere of the event. Here is Olga's description of the jubilation of the World Cup that allows one to encounter foreigners in unusual circumstances: "You don't even have to go to the championship: it is enough to ride the metro and you will be infected with this atmosphere....To see such a huge number of foreigners. It is one thing if they are motivated by, I don't know...some type of disasters, they come with a certain mood, refugees, immigrants, and it's a different thing if the people come to a celebration. They have a completely different energy, completely different goals." Thus, the event allowed an atmosphere of interaction and cultural exchange, outside of socially fraught everyday encounters among local and migrant populations. Mainstream media often emphasized foreigners' positive views of Russia after the World Cup, while more dissident media sources voiced hope that the exposure to many happy fans will pave the ground for Russian citizens' desire for more global openness and less hostile relations with the international community. While individuals' perceptions of international interactions are important, a more lasting consequence of the World Cup is the commentary on transnational events embedded in various social networks and media platforms.

Transnational and national belonging seem especially entangled in today's mediated social world. A key aspect of World Cup's amalgam of nationalism and transnationalism is its provocation of self-reflection and self-spectatorship: an intense interest in how foreign observers

are interpreting their own experiences and what conclusions they are drawing about Russian players, fans, and infrastructure, as well as about Russia as a whole. This mediated nationalism asks the nation to be approved and celebrated by transnational audiences. Despite these multiple levels of mediations, individuals articulated a desire for an immediate, unbiased experience of the transnationalism – an idea both appealing and impossible in the social world, where individuals are in dialogue with real and imaginary others on multiple platforms and in various venues.

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