

## The West Prepares to Get Dirty ahead of the 2018 FIFA World Cup

by **Grete Mautner** on [New Eastern Outlook](#)



In theory, football like all sorts of other sport activities can seem to be the most apolitical matter one can come across, while in practice political concerns have been dominating sports for decades now. Sportsmanship in an age of unhindered political meddling and predatory business practices goes far beyond the realm of pure entertainment. In fact, today football has become the cradle of patriotism, an opportunity to advertise a state and emphasize its significance on the international stage.

It's hard to establish when sports became a purely political matter, an indispensable element of hybrid warfare. This, in particular, was stressed by the iconic US President John F. Kennedy, who as early as 1960 announced that gold Olympic medals can be regarded as an equivalent of nuclear warheads. Indeed, both affect the prestige of a country and determine how much influence enjoys on the international stage, facilitating any state's steps aimed at addressing both internal and external political challenges. Sports have not just become a weapon of propaganda, but also a kind of substitute for real war, a means of satisfying political ambitions and reducing bills. It's no wonder then that bloodless war is waged through all means possible.

In the absence of other opportunities to express their political feeling, fans are engaged in manifesting their support of their national team, which have become an extension of political goals that those countries that they represent pursue. In recent years, sports stadiums provided an impetus for the revival of political patriotism and the demonstration of national feelings in public. If previously unhindered attempts to demonstrate one's sense of superiority were

shamed by the public discourse, those days are long gone today.

One can recall the events of the recent sports history like the 1976 Montreal Olympics was boycotted by African countries, protesting against the match of the South African and New Zealand national rugby teams being held in New Zealand. The pretext for boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics was the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, as for the boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics by a number of Warsaw Pact states, it was provoked by Reagan's statement that Washington could not guarantee the safety of Soviet athletes.

It should be noted that sports competitions with Russia (and earlier with the USSR) have long been of special significance for Western political elites that have been constantly used to aggravate the ongoing anti-Russian propaganda by unleashing incorrect, provocative or even completely false narrative.

And it does take a historian to come up with a handful of examples, like a number of irritated threats release in the Western media about the intention of boycotting the 2014 Winter Sochi Olympics because of alleged "violation of the rights of sexual minorities" taking place in Russia.

The 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korean Pyeongchang, where Russian athletes were forced to compete and under the flag of the International Olympic Committee instead of their national tricolor, made me remember about how deep the ties between sports and politics run. The founder of the modern Olympic movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, while formulating the principles of Olympism, put a particular emphasis on the defense of two provisions – the amateur status of athletes and the complete separation of the Olympic movement from the political agenda of the day, but today those two principles are all but gone. The Olympic Games and other major sports competitions have long ceased to be a place for an honest competition of amateur athletes, instead they evolved into battlefields where professionals are pursuing those political goals that those in power back at home told them to pursue.

As we're witnessing the [span lang="en-US"]bitter [/span]confrontation between the West and Russia both in various regions of the world and across financial markets, the West has been preparing to get nasty on the eve of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Indiscriminately and without any evidence, Britain has launched a Russophobic propaganda campaign based on the alleged chemical poisoning at Salisbury. While all the details of this the of this strange incident remain unclear, no evidence has been presented that could in any way link Moscow with the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter. Those are being aggravated even further by Washington's accusations against Russia about the alleged annexation of the Crimea peninsula and dubious actions in the Syrian war. Active attempts are being made to further promote the anti-Russian narrative by all sorts of media statements that there's a state-run doping system in Russian sports, although former head of the Moscow Anti-Doping Laboratory and WADA informant, Grigory Rodchenkov has been unable to provide any evidence to back a great many of his previous claims at the hearings of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

For the last two years Russophobic Western politicians have been pursuing a policy of squeezing out officials that can be describe as tolerant from all international sports

organizations, so Russia's interest could be disregarded at the highest level. The first official to suffer a sorry fate of many was the was the former president of the Olympic Council of Ireland and a member of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC), Patrick Hickey, who was arrested Rio de Janeiro on dubious charges of speculating with Olympic tickets. Even though the investigation resulted in nothing of substance being presented to the general public, he was stripped of all his posts and levers of influence, which sent other members of the IOC a clear message that they will suffer a similar fate if they allow Russian athletes to represent their country at the 2018 Pyeong Chang Olympics. Additionally, Washington is trying to undermine the authority of those sports figures that are heading certain sports unions, as the [case](#) of the International Biathlon Union president Anders Besseberg, that was forced to step down due to yet another string of dubious accusations, has shown. It seems that the president of the International Ski Federation, Gian-Franco Kasper could be next in line, with a lot of sports officials to follow, since Washington is determined to show that is not going to tolerate those figures that are not actively participating in its ongoing anti-Russian propaganda war. Yet, there's those who don't seem to be too afraid of it, like the former secretary general of the International Biathlon Union (IBU) and now a CAS arbitrator, Michael Gaistlinger wrote an article in support of the legitimate reunification of the Crimea with Russia and, satisfied the appeals made Russian athletes on their unlawful discrimination.

In an effort to fuel Russophobic sentiments on the eve of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, a number of Western politicians have been going above and beyond, demanding their nations to boycott this sports event. In particular, countries such as Great Britain, Australia or Iceland are very actively discussing now the decision to boycott the World Cup, while spreading all sorts of horrifically sounding stories in the media about Russia to prevent their fans from attending the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

However, it matters not for Moscow whether Teresa May will attend the World Cup, or not. And, it highly probable that she herself would find itself unable to make this trip without expressing official apologies to Moscow for a series of the groundless accusations she voiced against Russia.

German politicians representing the coalition parties, as well as the opposition, reacted critically to the idea of boycotting the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, as they believe that a propaganda war that is being waged against Russia couldn't be represented as a healthy rationale behind such a decision. The chairman of the German Foreign Affairs Committee of the Bundestag, Norbert Röttgen has recently announced in an [interview](#) with Der Spiegel that he was "against the political boycott" of the World Cup, since healthy sportsmanship should not be suffering because of today's political narrative, as it has always been promoting mutual understanding between the people. The foreign policy spokesperson of the CDU / CSU coalition in the Bundestag, Jürgen Hardt (CDU), has also rejected the idea of boycott as a viable course of action on the part of German, adding that he doesn't perceive such step as a viable instrument of modern diplomacy.

It should not be forgotten that a major football tournament is intended not only for politicians seeking to use any international event to advance their political narrative, but for fans that want to attend a possibly once-in-a-lifetime event. But this possibility could easily be ruined



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by individual politicians, who have been trying to destroy all channels of cultural communication linking certain states with the rest of the world.