

# ROCKING THE SOCHI OLYMPICS NARRATIVE: BORIS NEMTSOV AND PUTIN'S SOVEREIGNTY

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## Abstract

The authors analyze Nemtsov's contribution to the Olympic debate from the viewpoint of his public activism, as well as in terms of some concepts embedded in different political theories. Although Nemtsov himself was a policy practitioner, this chapter seeks to inscribe the discourse originated from his public campaigning into academic conceptualizations that might shed light on his legacy from a wider perspective of post-Soviet transformations in Russia. More specifically, the authors deploy Nemtsov's Olympic narrative in a zone of conflictual interactions of *hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses*. It appears obvious that, as seen from a political perspective, Nemtsov is strongly grounded in the latter, being one of the most outstanding critics of the Putin regime. Yet given the blurred boundary between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, the authors argue that one needs a fine-tuned conceptual reference points to substantiate the counter-hegemonic dispositions of Nemtsov's narrative. These proposed points are two binaries *of inclusion and exclusion*, and *norms and exceptions*. More specifically, the authors interpret the counter-hegemonic potential of Nemtsov's narrative as rooted in his intention to challenge two pillars of Putin's concept of sovereignty - a) the ability to define the criteria for inclusion in (and thus exclusion from) Russia as a political community, and b) the rule by exceptions, as opposed to the rule by norms. The two dichotomies can be used for analysis of Nemtsov's Olympic discourse. One way would be to look at them through the prism of an important linkage between *global institutions and authoritarian regimes*, duly articulated by Nemtsov. Another way of using the abovementioned dichotomies is through discussing the uneasy correlation between *soft power and hard power*, as exemplified by Nemtsov's take on linking the Sochi Olympics and the annexation of Crimea in one explanatory framework of analyzing the mechanisms of power under Putin's rule.

## Introduction

The Sochi winter Olympics of 2014 were a momentous element in the ongoing process of Russian identity-making, with political narratives often trumping discussions about sports as such. In the opinion of foreign observers, "these Olympics are about politics as well as sports"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Miriam Lansky, Dylan Myles-Primakoff. Sochi's Bitter Medicine, *Foreign Policy*, January 31, 2014, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/31/sochis-bitter-medicine/>

Due to its strong political accents the Sochi Games became a linchpin of different practices of governance, on the one hand, and policies of contestation and resistance, on the other.

The voice of Boris Nemtsov, a leader of the anti-Putin movement, who – rather symbolically – was born in Sochi, was one of the loudest among skeptics of the Games' official celebratory narrative. He contested the rationale of the Sochi Olympic project mainly on grounds of corruption charges, mass-scale embezzlement, administrative inefficiency and mismanagement. This is where two research questions we are going to address in this paper unfold: what political strings he pulled by critically addressing a plethora of financial and economic issues, and what academic concepts are needed for understanding the deeply political nature of his anti-corruption campaigning.

For untangling these questions, we intend to analyze Nemtsov's contribution to the Olympic debate not only from the viewpoint of his public activism, but also in terms of some concepts embedded in different political theories. Although Nemtsov himself was a policy practitioner, this paper seeks to inscribe the discourse originated from his public campaigning into academic conceptualizations that might shed light on his legacy as seen from a wider perspective of post-Soviet transformations in Russia. More specifically, we deploy Nemtsov's Olympic narrative in a zone of conflictual interactions of *hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses*. It appears obvious that, as seen from a political perspective, Nemtsov is strongly grounded in the latter, being one of the most outstanding critics of the Putin regime. Yet what seems to be consensual and almost evident, might turn into a puzzle deserving a subtler academic analysis. Given the blurred boundary between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses (often reminiscent of a "line in the sand"), we argue that we need a fine-tuned conceptual reference points to substantiate the counter-hegemonic dispositions of Nemtsov's narrative. We find these points in two binaries *of inclusion and exclusion*, and *norms and exceptions*. More specifically, we interpret the counter-hegemonic potential of Nemtsov's narrative as rooted in his intention to challenge two pillars of Putin's concept of sovereignty - a) the ability to define the criteria for inclusion in (and thus exclusion from) Russia as a political community, and b) the rule by exceptions, as opposed to the rule by norms.

Then we show how the two dichotomies can be used for analysis of Nemtsov's Olympic discourse. One way would be to look at them through the prism of an important linkage between *global institutions and authoritarian regimes*, duly articulated by Nemtsov. Another way of using the abovementioned dichotomies is through discussing the uneasy correlation between *soft power and hard power*, as exemplified by Nemtsov's take on linking the Sochi Olympics and the annexation of Crimea in one explanatory framework of analyzing the mechanisms of power under Putin's rule.

Empirically, we base our analysis on two reports co-authored and widely publicized by Boris Nemtsov - "Sochi and the Olympics" (co-authored with Vladimir Milov, 2009) and "The Winter Olympics in Subtropics" (co-authored with Leonid Martyniuk, 2013). To these two texts we add dozens of his interview, available both in written form and video-recorded in the recent six years, in which he elaborated on and further promoted his main arguments. We also include in

our empirical base media and Internet materials reflecting Nemtsov's campaign for the mayor of Sochi in 2009, which appears to be an important element in developing his critical attitudes towards the Games and in articulating most of the issues that became topical a few years later.

### **Nemtsov at the Crossroads of Hegemony and Counter-hegemony**

In this section we argue that Boris Nemtsov's engagement with the Sochi Olympic discourse has to be viewed as part of political collisions between hegemonic (i.e. official and Kremlin-generated) and counter-hegemonic / oppositional discourses. Unlike those authors who reduce the political meanings of the Olympics to its potential for boosting "sports nationalism" and demonstrating "national superiority"<sup>2</sup>, we venture to explain the political logic of the Sochi Games from the viewpoint of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses clashing with - but also imbricating over - each other, and deploy Boris Nemtsov's narrative in this dichotomous frame. Of course, his contribution to counter-hegemonic strategies was enormous, but a deeper contextualization of his narrative might elucidate and bring up new facets of the interrelationship between hegemony and counter-hegemony.

There are several ways in which the lines between the two are blurred. *First*, the anti-corruption momentum, key for Nemtsov's Olympic scepticism, was to some extent appropriated by the Kremlin that does agree that the problem exists and from time to time launches campaigns for bringing corrupt public servants to trial. In particular, Putin's dismissal of Akhmed Bilalov, the head of "The Resorts of the Northern Caucasus" company<sup>3</sup>, for mismanagement of construction works in Sochi, attests to the possible – though always only partial - absorption of anti-corruption discourse by the officialdom.

*Second*, Nemtsov used to present himself as an experienced regional leader (governor in Nizhny Novgorod and later a member of the legislature in Yaroslavl' oblast) and a federal politician. It is telling, for example, that the cover of the report "Sochi and the Olympiad" presents its co-authors, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov, as holders of important positions in the Russian government in the past - first vice prime minister (1997-1998) and deputy minister of energy (2002), correspondingly.

As former public servants, they had to find a delicate balance between unveiling the shadow economy of the exorbitantly costly Olympic show, on the one hand, and supporting the idea of the Games in Russia, on the other. Being aware of the dangers of rejecting this idea as such, the two co-authors explicitly affirmed: "We, as many Russians, would like Russia to

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<sup>2</sup> For an example of reductionist approaches, see: Vitaly Gorokhov. Natsional'nye identichnosti v global'noi sportivnoi kul'ture: vyzovy Sochi-2014 dlia Olimpiiskoi komandy Rossii, *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noi antropologii*, N 5, 2013, pp. 71-86.

<sup>3</sup> Andrey Pertsev. Olimpiada ne povod dlia gordosti, *Gazeta.ru*, 27 June 2013, available at [http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/06/26\\_a\\_5394569.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/06/26_a_5394569.shtml)

successfully host these Games. We are in favor of the Olympiad”<sup>4</sup>. The main alternative to the initial scenario of the Olympics they proposed is rather technical – the decentralization of the Games, i.e. moving most of competitions away from Sochi to other Russian cities with sports infrastructure much better prepared for hosting winter events, including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Yaroslavl, Cheliabinsk, Khanty-Mansiisk, Ufa, Novosibirsk, Saransk, etc.<sup>5</sup>

*Third*, a paradoxical common ground that Nemtsov shared with Putin can be found in the concept of hegemonic masculinity. There are lots of recent works analyzing Putin’s regime in gender and biopolitical terms<sup>6</sup>. As Valerie Sperling demonstrates, the same characteristics are also inherent for Russian counter-discourses, including activist art protest, as exemplified, for instance, by the Pussy Riot group<sup>7</sup>. Yet in contrast to the latter, homophobic exposures and LGBT issues were never high in Nemtsov’s critical agenda. He lambasted corruption, ecological degradation and human rights violations from a viewpoint of hegemonic masculinity deeply rooted in a patriarchal society. In 2011 he made some sexist and homophobic remarks toward Evgenia Chirikova, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Leonid Parfenov and other liberals as ‘lesbians, bitches and faggots’<sup>8</sup>. His later pronouncements were more balanced: in particular, in his *Livejournal* post in February 2013 he reacted to the infamous amendment to the anti-gay propaganda law by saying that he can’t be silent on this “rascals’ law”<sup>9</sup>.

Internationally, the most visible element of the anti-Sochi protests was the LGBT campaign against the anti-gay propaganda law. “The Winter Olympic Games ... are sure to be a site of protests and demonstrations, thanks to myriad issues with human rights, especially Russia's controversial anti-LGBT propaganda law”<sup>10</sup>, a Western journalist asserted on the eve of the opening ceremony. Yet Nemtsov’s public exposure of his macho life style (‘I am a hetero, I

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<sup>4</sup> Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov. Sochi i Olimpiada. Independent expert report of members of “Solidarity” United Democratic Movement, Moscow, 2009, P. 5 available at [http://www.rusolidarnost.ru/files/Sochi\\_i\\_Olimpiada.pdf](http://www.rusolidarnost.ru/files/Sochi_i_Olimpiada.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov. Sochi i Olimpiada. Independent expert report of members of “Solidarity” United Democratic Movement, Moscow, 2009, pp. 34-35 available at [http://www.rusolidarnost.ru/files/Sochi\\_i\\_Olimpiada.pdf](http://www.rusolidarnost.ru/files/Sochi_i_Olimpiada.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance: Anna Bernstein. An Inadvertent Sacrifice: Body Politics and Sovereign Power in the Pussy Riot Affair. *Critical Inquiry*, 2013, 40 (1), pp. 220–241; Helena Goscilo (ed.) *Putin as celebrity and cultural icon*. New York: Routledge, 2013; Francisco Martinez. The erotic biopower of putinism: from glamour to pornography. *Laboratorium*, 2013, 4 (3), 105–122; Peter Rutland. The Pussy Riot affair: gender and national identity in Putin’s Russia. *Nationalities Papers*, 2014, 42 (4), 575–582; Ellen Rutten. 'Putin on Panties: Sexing Russia in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture', in Jenny Genis, René Martin, et. al (eds.) *Between West and East: Festschrift for Wim Honselaar*. Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2012, pp. 567–597.

<sup>7</sup> Valerie Sperling. Sex, Politics and Putin: Political legitimacy in Russia. NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Editorial. Boris Nemtsov: «Lesbiyanka, blyad', LGBT, blyad'». *GayRussia portal*. December 21, 2011. Available at <http://www.gayrussia.eu/content/news/russia/3300/>

<sup>9</sup> Boris Nemtsov. Eschio odin zakon podletsov. *Livejournal blog*, February 1, 2013. Available at <http://b-nemtsov.livejournal.com/168420.html>

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Garcia. The Long History of Olympic Boycotts, Protests and Demonstrations, January 27, 2014, available at <http://www.advocate.com/sports/2014/01/27/long-history-olympic-boycotts-protests-and-demonstrations>

love women’<sup>11</sup>) prevented him from embracing strong corporeal and bodily rhetoric for challenging Putin’s regime. In terms of both the sovereign power and Nemtsov's discourse, holding the hegemonic masculine position means insignificance of such issues as LGBT or feminist claims for emancipation. In his revelatory public campaigning against corruption at the Sochi Olympics he preferred to distance from the LGBT protest, as well as remained indifferent to the international attempts of bringing up another high profile issue - that of Circassian genocide<sup>12</sup>. This demonstrates flexibility of boundaries between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, as well as an inner hierarchy constitutive for each of them.

### **The Inclusion / Exclusion Game**

This fuzzy line between hegemony and counter-hegemony may serve a starting point for claiming that Nemtsov's Olympic counter-strategy was double-tracked. On the surface, it was premised on a set of rational and calculable arguments that could have constituted the Habermasian space for public communication with the Kremlin, potentially conducive to a shared understanding of the common good. In this vein, one of his central points was that the exorbitant budget of the Games could be spent with more palpable social effects for each Russian family. This discourse was harmonious with multiple media articles critical of the Sochi project for its opaqueness and the cult of secrecy<sup>13</sup>, but in the meantime avoided excessive symbolic association with cosmopolitan / liberal emancipatory agenda. Nemtsov invested more efforts in strengthening his reputation as experienced domestic practitioner, rather than in supporting or solidarizing with the types of protest that transcended the cultural boundaries of hegemonic masculinity.

Yet under a closer scrutiny one may discover that Nemtsov’s narrative, with its strong emphasis on legal and technical matters, was deeply political in at least two aspects. First, it was aimed at *internationally* de-legitimizing the regime by means of publicly exposing its corrupt nature. Second, Nemtsov ultimately questioned the *domestic* core of Putin’s hegemonic discourse as aimed at defining the rules of belonging to the Russian political community-in-the-making through emotionally articulating the ideas of patriotism and unconditional – if not quasi-religious - loyalty to the state. It is the idea of Russia’s domestic heterogeneity and diversity that might explain the search for a “national idea” in 1990s as an instrument for anchoring this community in certain nodal points and thus avoiding its further – and very probable, as many Russian independent analysts deem – decomposition. Endeavors of defining the rules of belonging – and

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<sup>11</sup> Boris Nemtsov. Eschio odin zakon podletsov...

<sup>12</sup> Alexis Zimberg, Christian Caryl. The Russian Anti-Olympic Protest that Putin Doesn’t Want You to Know About, *Foreign Policy*, February 19, 2014, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/19/the-russian-anti-olympic-protest-that-putin-doesnt-want-you-to-know-about/>

<sup>13</sup> Nikolay Yaremenko. Strashnye kartinki iz Sochi, *Chastniy Korrespondent*, 10 October 2013, available at [http://www.chaskor.ru/article/strashnye\\_kartinki\\_iz\\_sochi\\_33788?fb\\_action\\_ids=339787069498874&fb\\_action\\_types=og.recommends&fb\\_source=other\\_multiline&action\\_object\\_map=%7B%22339787069498874%22%3A210252419152185%7D&action\\_type\\_map=%7B%22339787069498874%22%3A%22og.recommends%22%7D&action\\_ref\\_map=%5B%5D](http://www.chaskor.ru/article/strashnye_kartinki_iz_sochi_33788?fb_action_ids=339787069498874&fb_action_types=og.recommends&fb_source=other_multiline&action_object_map=%7B%22339787069498874%22%3A210252419152185%7D&action_type_map=%7B%22339787069498874%22%3A%22og.recommends%22%7D&action_ref_map=%5B%5D)

thus the criteria for inclusion in and exclusion from the national community-in-the-making – took different forms, including those based on traditional - ethnic and religious – stabilizers of national identity. Yet obviously, too strong an emphasis on the dominating Orthodoxy and ethnically Russian identity could be divisive and rejected, in particular, by Russian Muslims. With the beginning of Putin's third presidential term, the Kremlin started using different instruments of consolidating national majority on conservative and isolationist principles. This policy included the legal exceptionalization of LGBT people (the anti-gay propaganda law)<sup>14</sup>, holders of double citizenship (who since autumn 2014 have to register in this capacity in the Federal Migration Service)<sup>15</sup> and professionals cooperating with foreign partners (the "foreign agents" legislation)<sup>16</sup>. Public appeals to strip political dissenters of Russian citizenship – reminiscent of the widely known Soviet practice – are also part of the policy of "purifying" the collective body of the nation by means of marginalizing and ostracizing groups that are believed to misfit the hegemonic vision of "Russianness". The rhetorical labeling of dissenters – including Nemtsov himself - as "the fifth column" and "national traitors" served the same purpose of solidifying the pro-Putin majority against the artificially constructed "internal enemies".

The Putin regime is vitally interested in finding and properly articulating key reference points to be capable of not only consolidating the nation, but also of publicly exposing the distinction between the loyalty to the "common cause" and disloyalty, fidelity and infidelity, with the blackening of the latter. In Etienne Balibar's words, "a collective identity, or the constitution of a relation of belonging ... is the constitution of a bond"<sup>17</sup>. The Sochi Olympics was apparently one of those – seemingly non-ideological – mega-projects politically aimed exactly at constructing collective identity and allegiance by means of contriving such a bond. By so doing, this project emotionally invested in both consolidating the political community and differentiating it from the "anti-patriotic" pro-Western opposition, of which Nemtsov was a leading figure.

It is from here that the power of the Kremlin to define criteria of belongingness to the political community of Russia stems. Putin's Sochi project was politically meant to directly attach the inclusion into this community to the patriotic support for the Games as an epitome of Russian grandeur and worldwide respect, regardless of questionable instruments that were employed for this purpose - from enforced evictions to financial wrongdoings. To some extent, Putin's strategy can be understood in the categories of *jouissance*, a Lacanian psychoanalytical concept reinterpreted by Slavoj Žižek as implying normalization through imposed enjoyment and consumption of entertainment as an essential, if not central, part of the spirit of national

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<sup>14</sup> Amendment 6.21 for the Russian Law Book of Administrative Violations, subjects to administrative punishment from 2 to 5 years for 'propaganda of homosexual relations among minors', is effective of June 30, 2013

<sup>15</sup> Federal Law of Russian Federation # 142, is effective of June 4, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Federal Law of Russian Federation # 121, is effective of June 29, 2012

<sup>17</sup> Etienne Balibar. *Politics and the Other Scene*. London and New York: Verso, 2002. P.27

community that may lose coherence “when there is no belief in a shared enjoyment, whether shared in a fantasmic past or an idealized future”<sup>18</sup>.

This explanatory framework can be helpful for comprehending what is politically counter-hegemonic in Nemtsov’s Sochi narrative that seemingly was just another version of multiple anti-corruption investigations and invectives<sup>19</sup>, including those integrated in the hegemonic discourse. The kernel of Nemtsov’s protestation against the Sochi Olympics was that, speaking about corruption in seemingly financial and economic terms, he in fact touched upon the deeply political issue of *emotionally* constructing the collective Russian Self on the basis of the loyalty to the regime. He contested the key element of Putin’s Olympic discourse – the pride on the state, and substituted it with its opposite – the shame for the corrupt ruling class. This contestation exacerbated a deep feeling within the society of a “split into fans of the Olympics and haters of the Olympics... Even close friends fight over it: ‘Oh, you like the Olympics — that means you’re a traitor’. And vice versa... Critics who accuse the authorities of building a fake export version of Russia in Sochi hurt the feelings of Olympic fans: “By spitting on Putin, the opposition and the Western media spit on us, at our Olympics”<sup>20</sup>.

Nemtsov’s contestation of the hegemonic discourse only confirmed the original political meanings of the Games as a laboratory for Russian identity-making. Ultimately, it is the sovereign to whom Nemtsov had to address his protest against legalized exceptions and inclusions in the form of prohibition, rejections, bans and denial of rights, thus engaging with an inclusive / exclusive type of relations with the Kremlin<sup>21</sup>.

### Exceptions versus Norms

In this section we turn to what constitutes, in our opinion, the core of Nemtsov’s contestation of a second pillar of Putin’s model of sovereign power - the *rule by exceptions*. The political meaning of exception is deeply grounded in the Schmittian understanding of sovereignty as based on political will and the ability to take decisions beyond institutional constraints and commitments. In other words, “the sovereign is by definition endowed with a will so strong that is capable of abolishing any existing system of norms”<sup>22</sup>. In political theory this triggered a vivid

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<sup>18</sup> Jodi Dean. Why Zizek for Political Theory? *International Journal of Zizek Studies*, vol. 1, N 1, p. 22 (18-32)

<sup>19</sup> <http://sochi.fbk.info/en/>

<sup>20</sup> Anna Nemtsova. Patriotism and the Olympics, *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2014, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/17/patriotism-and-the-olympics/>

<sup>21</sup> Slawomir Oliwniak. Foucault and Agamben: Law as Inclusive / Exclusive Discourse, *Studies in Logics, Grammar and Rhetoric*, N 26 (39), 2011, p. 52 (49-53)

<sup>22</sup> Camil Ungureanu. Derrida on Free Decision: Between Habermas’ Discursivism and Schmitt’s Decisionism, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 16, N 3, 2008, p. 322 (292-325).

discussion focused on the Schmittian paradoxical assertion “that to produce law it need not be based on law”<sup>23</sup>.

Putin’s Olympic project from the outset was conceptually ambiguous, since it embraced two interrelated perspectives. First, this mega-event, according to Kremlin’s design, was supposed to give a powerful boost to Russian national identity, a collective We-feeling infused with positive narration of the country's "normalcy" and its comeback to a group of world leaders. Second, the Olympic project was meant to legitimize what might be called, along the lines of Carl Schmitt, the state of sovereign exception through extraordinary measures that are not necessarily harmonious with the law. In fact, Putin’s normalization could only be achieved by means of the application of extraordinary – and extra-legal – instruments, which constituted the major political issue Nemtsov tried to unveil by questioning the sovereign's "capacity to distinguish between the legal and the illegal, the normal and the exceptional"<sup>24</sup>, with declarations of exceptions quickly turning into a normal condition.

In fact, as an opposition leader, Nemtsov had to face “the state of exception” as a set of policy tool the Kremlin regularly applied to constrain the dissent. As a candidate who ran for the post of the Sochi mayor in 2009, Nemtsov and his team were targets of a policy of sovereign exceptions, with courts directly fulfilling Kremlin's orders instead of protecting equal rights for all candidates, and media outlets refusing to publish political commercials of the oppositional candidate. The whole administrative apparatus, in Nemtsov's later words, was mobilized to prevent him from winning the election where he nevertheless finished second with 13,6% of votes, which was one of the best results achieved by the opposition on municipal level during all years of Putin’s presidency.

After the 2009 mayoral election, Nemtsov became even more critical of the Olympic project. He started more consistently claiming that its implementation on the basis of multiple exceptions is detrimental for the country. This is how Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov lambasted Putin’s policy of sovereign exceptionalism:

“The federal law on hosting the Olympiad de-facto detaches Sochi from the Russian Constitution for a decade. It declares redundant public hearings and promulgation of conclusions of environmental expertise... In connection to the Games the legislation is being changes in order to facilitate the enforced withholding of land and make impossible to contest it in the court. The most precious territories of natural reserves are stripped of their protection by the state. Thus, in 2006 the functional zoning of the Sochi national park was hastily altered to allow the authorities to start constructing Olympic objects in the areas under protection... In 2003 by a decree of the Russian government many reserve lands lost their status and since that time could be leased for building tourist and sports facilities...”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Antonio Cerella. Religion and political form: Carl Schmitt’s genealogy of politics as critique of Juergen Habermas’s post-secular discourse, *Review of International Studies*, N 38, 2012, p. 982 (975-994)

<sup>24</sup> R.B.J.Walker. *After the Globe, Before the World*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. P. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov. *Op.cit.*, P. 26



The message was clear: with the rampant corruption Russia is way below international normative standards, and the Games therefore can't "normalize" Russia. Nemtsov also argued that it was the direct personification of the Sochi project with Putin that predetermined the blatant passivity of the Accounting Chamber that refused to disclose the extant information on profligacy and mismanagement in construction works and city infrastructure development during the lead-up to the Games.

The state has breached its own economic norms as well. This is how Boris Nemtsov and Leonid Martyniuk depicted this:

"The rule operating with regard to private investments has been that 70% of the investments are covered by loans from the Vneshekonombank (a state corporation!) and 30% by private contributions. However, by the end of 2012, the government admitted that practically all the Olympic construction works ... were running at a loss and would never pay for themselves. As Vneshekonombank cautiously put it, "The investors began to view more critically the market risks for realization of the projects. The question of return on investment arose." And they increased the bank loans to 90%"<sup>26</sup>.

The co-authors also pointed to the fact that in spite of Russia's earlier promises to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) during the bidding process, there was no parliamentary oversight of the financial management of the Games. Most of the Olympic orders were obtained without competitive tenders by brothers Rotenberg and other members of Putin's inner circle. In environmental protection, he claimed, international norms were disregarded. Another element of the Olympic exceptionalism raised by Nemtsov is the massive use of migrant workforce - about 16,000 of them were semi-legally employed in Sochi, which created a zone of indistinction between legality and its opposite.

Nemtsov was also critical of enhanced security measures practiced by the organizers of the Games. He particularly mentioned a document known as "fan's passport" that all visitors in the Olympic stadia had to obtain from security services in addition to regular tickets<sup>27</sup>. In Nemtsov's view, this is an example of unjustified restrictions that encroached upon citizens' rights and ultimately legalized "the state of exception" not as a temporary deviation from normal everyday rules, but rather as a model of extra-legal governance with a huge potential of self-dissemination in many other spheres and situations. As a political commentator Sergey Medvedev put it, the Sochi project, sanctified as an act of sovereignty and detached from law,

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<sup>26</sup> Boris Nemtsov and Leonid Martyniuk. Winter Olympics in the Sub-Tropics: Corruption and Abuse in Sochi. Investigative report, December 6, 2013, p. 6, available at <http://www.interpretermag.com/winter-olympics-in-the-sub-tropics-corruption-and-abuse-in-sochi/>

<sup>27</sup> Boris Nemtsov and Leonid Martyniuk. Op. cit. P. 26

morals and budgetary regulations, constitutes in Russia a new financial, legal and societal anomaly to be reproduced further on<sup>28</sup>.

### **Globalization and Autocracy**

Yet Nemtsov not only campaigned against two pillars of Putin's sovereignty - its ability to define rules of belonging and rules of exception, but also unveiled the binary structure of the hegemonic discourse: it is co-produced by the Kremlin and the IOC. It is the latter that boosts sovereignty with exceptional arrangements at its core, and thus bears its share of responsibility for consolidation of authoritarian and corrupt practices within Russia

Both IOC and Putin's regime present themselves as staying beyond politics, yet nevertheless in practice engage in politics in many different ways<sup>29</sup>, basically through defining rules of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the content of key messages translated through Olympics. In this light, one of the strongest Nemtsov's statements was a direct accusation of IOC in corrupt liaisons with Moscow<sup>30</sup>, which unveiled global sports institutions' penchant for organizing mega-events in non-democratic countries - a tendency that obviously stretches far beyond Russia. Nemtsov's invectives were consonant with harsh international criticism of the IOC for lack of transparency and corruptive scandals<sup>31</sup>, which can be matched only by the evidences of corruption within FIFA.

Nemtsov pointed to one of the most controversial – and definitely pivotal – elements of the Kremlin Olympic project – its full legitimation by the IOC, in spite of the highly problematic practices of human rights violations, environmental deterioration, and corruption. According to IOC regulations, 'no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in the Olympic areas'<sup>32</sup>, which lays ground for suppressing actions of civic activism and disagreement of any sort. In all cases of this kind the IOC took the side of the Russian government. Asked about the case of imprisonment of an environmental activist Evgeniy Vitishko in Sochi, an IOC spokesman, Mark Adams, stated that he was guilty of vandalising a house and said the IOC is satisfied with assurances given by Russian authorities: "We received

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<sup>28</sup> Sergey Medvedev. Osada Sochi: kak Olimpiada prevraschaetsa v chrezvychainoe polozhenie, *Forbes*, 18 September 2013, available at <http://m.forbes.ru/article.php?id=244779>

<sup>29</sup> M. Patrick Cottrell. Not just the Games? Power, protest and politics at the Olympics, *European Journal of International Relations*, N 17 (4), 2010, p. 744 (729-753).

<sup>30</sup> Boris Nemtsov. My platim ne tol'ko za Olimpiadu, no i za dvorets Yakunina. *Radio Free Europe*, 3 June 2013, available at <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/25005247.html>

<sup>31</sup> Jules Boykoff. A Bid for a Better Olympics, *The New York Times*, 13 August 2014, available at <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/08/14/opinion/a-chance-to-reform-the-olympic-movement.html?smid=tw-share&r=3&referrer=>

<sup>32</sup> Editorial. IOC President: 'Freedom of expression is a basic human right, and that application of rule 51 is a matter of common sense.' Olympic.org. Official website of the Olympic Movement, 10 April, 2008, available at <http://www.olympic.org/content/news/media-resources/manual-news/1999-2009/2008/04/10/freedom-of-expression-is-a-basic-human-right/>

clarification from Sochi that this is, and we think it remains, a non-Olympic case"<sup>33</sup>. In the meantime, the IOC has warned the 'Pussy Riot' group not to come to the Olympic park for any political demonstration<sup>34</sup>. This obvious similarity between the policies of the Kremlin and the IOC strengthen Nemtsov's argument of a structural liaison between global sports institutions and local practices of autocratic rule.

The importance of highlighting the shadow connections between authoritarian governments and global sport institutions extend far beyond the case of Sochi, and can be projected to the forthcoming FIFA 2018 World Cup. There were multiple accusations in the international media of corruptive linkages between FIFA officials, on the one hand, and the Russian government and its business structures - such as "Gazprom" - on the other. In particular, the documentary film shot by the *Deutsche Welle* on May 2015 and titled the 'Sold Football' (dir. by Robert Kempe and Jochen Leufgens) makes many of these facts public<sup>35</sup>.

Against this backdrop, FIFA, the organizer of the World Football Cup in Russia in 2018, plays the same role in stabilizing the hegemonic regime in Russia, as IOC did. Thus, the then president of FIFA Sepp Blatter, responding to the appeals of US Senators to strip Russia of the FIFA tournament as a reaction to Kremlin's policy in Ukraine, suggested that his opponents could "stay home"<sup>36</sup>.

Nemtsov's invectives against indulgent and gratifying policy of the IOC towards multiple irregularities and direct legal offenses during the implementation of the Sochi project can be helpful for understanding the scandal erupted around FIFA in May 2015. Nemtsov was one of those who predicted that the 2018 World Football Cup could be harmful for the integrity of Russia that, like Greece, might face deplorable repercussions of corrupt economy<sup>37</sup>. Commenting on the probability of revoking the FIFA decision to host the World Cup in Russia, Nemtsov claimed that it is the Kremlin's policy towards Ukraine that can make this option feasible, but in the meantime this can help the country save huge amount of money<sup>38</sup>. Months after Nemtsov's murder it was exactly this argument – Russia's involvement in the military insurgency in eastern

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<sup>33</sup> Editorial. Russian protestors fall silent while Olympic roadshow occupies Sochi, *The Guardian*, 16 February 2014, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2014/feb/16/russian-protesters-olympic-sochi-gay>

<sup>34</sup> Nick Miller. Sochi Winter Olympics: IOC warns Pussy Riot over protests, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 2014, available at <http://www.smh.com.au/sport/winter-olympics/sochi-winter-olympics-ioc-warns-pussy-riot-over-protests-20140219-3318a.html>

<sup>35</sup> Andrei Gurkov. Fil'm telekanala ARD rasskazal, kak Katar i Rossiya podkupali FIFA, *DW portal*, 5 May, 2015, available at <http://www.dw.de/фильм-телеканала-ard-рассказал-как-катар-и-россия-подкупали-фифа/a-18429855>

<sup>36</sup> Blatter prizval ostat'sa doma politikov, ne dovol'nykh provedeniem ChM-2018 v Rossii, *Gazeta.ru*, 20 April, 2015, available at [http://www.gazeta.ru/sport/news/2015/04/20/n\\_7125437.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/sport/news/2015/04/20/n_7125437.shtml)

<sup>37</sup> Editorial. Nemtsov: Chempionat mira po futbolu – 2018 mozhет razvalit' stranu. *Regnum Information Agency*, 24 June 2013, available at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1675632.html>

<sup>38</sup> Editorial. Nemtsov ob ugroze FIFA lishit' Rossiyu prav na provedenie ChM – 2018: Zato s'ekonomim 3 trilliona, *Glavred*, 12 August 2014, available at <http://glavred.info/sport/nemcov-ob-ugroze-fifa-lishit-rossiyu-prav-na-provedenie-chm-2018-zato-sekonomim-3-trilliona-287361.html>

Ukraine and the Western economic sanctions – that was discussed as possible reasons to move the FIFA Cup to a different country.

### **Hard and Soft Powers: the Sochi - Crimea nexus**

Another momentous element of Kremlin's hegemonic policies is the annexation of Crimea, an act of external projection of sovereignty. In March 2014 it became another - of a drastically different kind, but paradoxically sharing with the Olympics its function of revealing the “fifth column” and “national traitors” - mega-project masterminded by the Kremlin. It played a role of litmus test for Kremlin's rules of belonging and henceforth the official version of patriotism implying the right of the sovereign to exceptionalize relations with some neighbors and politically treat them differently to other countries.

What was at stake in both cases (in Sochi and Crimea) is the making of collective identity, and the construction of bonds constitutive for relations of belonging to a “collective We”. By establishing and imposing its “hierarchy of communal references”<sup>39</sup>, the state performed a hegemonic function, yet in the meantime unleashed counter-hegemonic discourses. In this section we dwell upon Nemtsov's disavowal of the widely spread reading of the Sochi Games as a heyday of Russian soft power, which – as it might stem from what he said – was never a top priority goal for Putin.

“Images we'll see of the majestic Caucasus Mountains surrounding Sochi during the Olympics could help to erase some of the painful memories of the recent wars in the Caucasus”<sup>40</sup>, a political commentator wrote only a month before the Games. The rosy expectations did not however come true – by annexing Crimea in the immediate aftermath of the closing ceremony in Sochi, Russia only reactualized the “painful memories” and extended them to the whole post-Soviet region. It would be fair to posit that “Russia's response to the Ukrainian crisis and the Olympic Games in Sochi are essentially rooted in the same impetus: Putin's geopolitical ambitions”<sup>41</sup>.

If the Sochi project legitimized corruption and suppressed civil activism, the annexation of Crimea that immediately followed the Olympics in March 2014 included another key element in the loyalty matrix: legitimization of land grabs and forceful border changes. Boris Nemtsov straightforwardly claimed that the annexation of Crimea was planned during the Olympic Games, which makes it the first case of land appropriation designed during a global mega-event. This questions the widely spread characterization of the Sochi project as an indication of Russia's principled preference for soft power tools, as opposed to military instrument of controlling foreign territories. This is an important argument for deconstructing the popular interpretation of

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<sup>39</sup> Etienne Balibar. Op.cit. P. 69.

<sup>40</sup> Dominic Basulto. Hosting the Sochi Olympics is all about soft power, *Russia Direct*, 3 January 2014, available at <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/hosting-sochi-olympics-all-about-soft-power>

<sup>41</sup> Stefan Haus. The Putin Games, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 5 March 2014, available at <http://fpif.org/putin-games/>

the Sochi Olympic as a zenith of Russia's soft power that was abruptly reversed by the Russia's policy in Ukraine after the EuroMaidan revolution. Nemtsov's reasoning is fully consistent with those commentators in the West who deem that "the Sochi Olympics proved a calculated cover for Vladimir Putin's plans to invade Ukraine"<sup>42</sup>.

The economic part of the annexation of Crimea pointed to another similarity with the Sochi project: Nemtsov expected Russian investments in Crimea to be as costly as another Olympics for the Russian budget<sup>43</sup>. Alexei Kudrin confirmed this by estimating that the annexation of Crimea will cost Russia from 150 to 200 billion USD, which includes capital flee and losses caused by economic sanctions<sup>44</sup>. Nemtsov's prediction that the funds invested into the Olympics won't bring pay-off effects was fully corroborated by the developments after the Olympics. In particular, the Sochi – Crimea nexus was indirectly substantiated by the huge losses that VEB Bank incurred in 2014 due to its funding of the Sochi project and credit risks in Ukraine<sup>45</sup>.

Therefore, Nemtsov was one of those public figures who interpreted the annexation of Crimea as another link in the chain of Kremlin's unlawful policies with strong security repercussions. It is quite illustrative that the vocabulary of the Nemtsov – Milov report was replete with securitization language – they refer to "engineering and transportation collapse", "chronic energy deficit", "irreparable blow to environment", "destruction of the urban milieu in Sochi", "threats of a military conflict" in the near-by South Caucasus, and "risks of growing inter-ethnic tensions" (allegedly due to the probable inflow of migrants)<sup>46</sup>.

Exceptionality is what makes Sochi and Crimea comparable to each other: Nemtsov harshly lambasted Putin for signing a decree allowing public servants from Crimea to keep doing business due to "specific situation"<sup>47</sup> on the ground, which contravenes Russian legislation. For integrating Crimea into Russia the State Duma passed 21 legal acts in which special measures were in one way or another stipulated, which made experts claim that Crimea might turn in "another Chechnya", a territory where Russian legislation either is invalid or applies with numerous amendments<sup>48</sup>. Yet the two cases are also comparable in terms of their constitutive

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<sup>42</sup> Jens Laurson and George Pieler. The Ukraine After Sochi: Lessons on Hard Power and Soft Power, *Forbes*, 18 March 2014, available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/laursonpieler/2014/03/17/the-ukraine-after-sochi-lessons-on-hard-power-and-soft-power/>

<sup>43</sup> Boris Nemtsov. Krym oboidiotsa Rossii v eschio odnu Sochinskuyu Olimpiadu, *UkrInform* Information Agency, 17 March 2013, available at [http://www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/krim\\_oboydetsya\\_rossii\\_v\\_eshche\\_odnu\\_sochinskuyu\\_olimpiadu\\_\\_\\_boris\\_nemtsov\\_1613959](http://www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/krim_oboydetsya_rossii_v_eshche_odnu_sochinskuyu_olimpiadu___boris_nemtsov_1613959)

<sup>44</sup> Kudrin: Krym budet stoit' Rossii \$ 150-200, *Gazeta.ru*, 31 March 2015, available at [http://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2015/03/31/n\\_7066205.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2015/03/31/n_7066205.shtml)

<sup>45</sup> Ivan Gidasov. Olympiiskiy antirekord VEBa, *Gazeta.ru*, 30 April, 2015, available at <http://www.gazeta.ru/business/2015/04/30/6662573.shtml>

<sup>46</sup> Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov. Op.cit.

<sup>47</sup> Boris Nemtsov. Novaya politicheskaya real'nost. Interview with "Ekho Moskvy" Radio, 16 May 2014, available at <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/year2014/1319266-echo/>

<sup>48</sup> Katerina Shulman. Poluostrov iskliucheniya, *Kommersant*, 17 March, 2015, available at <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2688488>

roles in determining the rules of inclusion and exclusion as mechanisms of identity-making based on the loyalty to the regime and the differentiation between its patriotic supporters and "infidel" opposition.

## Conclusions

The debate on Nemtsov's Olympic discourse stretches far beyond the case of Sochi and gains even a greater profile and topicality against the backdrop of the deep crisis in Russia's relations with the West as a result of a series of events that followed the Sochi Olympics. Instead of celebrating Russian soft power potential and demonstrating the end of economic troubles in the country<sup>49</sup>, as pro-Putin loyalists have expected, only a few months after the closure of the Games Russia found itself under severe economic sanctions, with many of its officials on travel ban, the growing domestic economic and financial troubles and de-facto involvement in the military conflict with Ukraine. Perspectives of ameliorating "the image of wild Russia"<sup>50</sup> are again delayed to a far distant future.

Hosting the Sochi Olympics neither prevented Russia from resorting to a hybrid war against Ukraine, nor warranted success of future mega-events in this country: the lead-up to the FIFA 2018 World Cup takes place under the growing economic isolation, with Western businesses gradually leaving Russian markets. The crisis in the entire industry of Russian football - from scandalous arrear payments to the national team coach<sup>51</sup> to the ousting of the head of the Russian Football Union in the immediate aftermath of the international legal investigation against FIFA - is another trouble that Russia faces. These developments only support the *telos* of Nemtsov's narrative of contesting the basics of Putin's sovereignty - the rule by exceptions sustained by international sports institutions, castigation of disloyalty to the regime, and preference to hard power – as opposed to soft power - instruments.

The rule by exceptions, elevated by Putin at the highest point of his political agenda, corrupts the entire system of relations of power in Russia and undermines its governability. The same goes for sovereign division of the society into numerically dominant loyal majority and statistically much smaller yet politically troublesome groups of dissenters. The crisis of Putinism obliterates the PR effects of the Sochi Olympics and ushers in an isolationist Russia enmeshed in a self-exhausting conflict with the West.

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<sup>49</sup> Editorial. Sochi Games as a display of soft power, *Aljazeera*, 8 February 2014, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2014/02/sochi-games-are-display-soft-power-201428193756823316.html>

<sup>50</sup> Victor Cepoi. The Power of Winter Olympic Games, *Analyzing Europe*, 20 February 2014, available at <http://analyzingeurope.com/the-power-of-winter-olympic-games/>

<sup>51</sup> See, for instance: Egor Maksimov. Rossiyskiy futbol'nyi konfuz. *Dozhd'* TV channel, 2 October, 2014, available at [http://tvrain.ru/news/istochnik\\_dozhdja\\_fabio\\_kapello\\_mozhet\\_podat\\_v\\_otstavku\\_13\\_oktjabrja-376114/](http://tvrain.ru/news/istochnik_dozhdja_fabio_kapello_mozhet_podat_v_otstavku_13_oktjabrja-376114/)

