



HARD RULERS PURSUING SOFT POWER

At the end of 2021, the Language Council of Norway made a surprising move from language protection into sports politics. Arguing that the new year 2022 would see a series of global sports events hosted in authoritarian countries, they chose the verb ‘*sportsvaske*’ as the new ‘Word of the Year’ – derived directly from the English ‘sportswashing’.

The decision reflected a global shift in the sports political debate in this century. Often, the history of crimes in sport was told with athletes, coaches, doctors, and officials as the culprits of doping, corruption, match-fixing, sexual abuse, and other criminal conducts. But lately, the crime stories have focused more often on states as perpetrators.

Today, when nation-states try to wash away crimes against humanity by offering sports entertainment instead of human rights, they are accused of ‘sportswashing’.

Sportswashing was first used when Azerbaijan and its ruling Aliyev family hosted the European Games in 2015. Since then it has been used as a label whenever autocratic nations have thrown unprecedented fortunes into buying sports clubs and hosting international sports events – with the intent to, among others, distract from their bad human rights records and clean the images of their countries.

That challenge is in no way new to modern sport.

The opening ceremonies at major events are golden opportunities to convey a nation's self-image and technological capacity to a world audience. At the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, nearly 2,000 drones shaped a globe passing over the attendees. Photo: Ali Atmaca/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

When Nazi Germany hosted the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, the framing of Adolf Hitler's views on German values and culture was orchestrated by Joseph Goebbels, the minister of propaganda. And when Zaire hosted a heavyweight world title fight in 1974 between Afro-American boxers Mohammad Ali and George Foreman, the 'Rumble in the Jungle' was framed by supporters of Zaire dictator Mobuto Sese Seko as "a fight between two blacks in a black nation organised by blacks and seen by the whole world; this is a victory of Mobutism."

When China hosted the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, the event was met with threats of boycott and demonstrations organised by human rights defenders who protested against the communist regime's oppression of Tibet, the religious group Falun Gong, and civic rights in general.

But at the time, many observers also expected that awarding the Olympics to Beijing was a recognition of China's global importance that might lead to political and economic reforms.

"The greatest legacy of the Beijing Games will be a largely intangible one – its human and cultural legacy," wrote Susan Brownell, associate professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, US in 2008.

"Hosting the Olympic Games will require China to 'link up with international standards', accelerating the process that already began over 100 years ago. The changes that occur will not be those forced upon China by others, but will be those that China voluntarily seeks out so that it may play a key role in the global society of the 21st century." Hence, the opening ceremony was attended by government representatives of all kinds of political systems. And even if the hopes of reform would soon be disappointed, the event left China with an international influence much beyond sportswashing.

Framing the narrative

The term sportswashing does not catch the full story of what a country can achieve through international sports events.

All nations, whether democratic or not, are trying to frame what they see as attractive values and cultures of their countries. In doing so, the universal popularity of sport is a perfect communication tool, and global sports organisations such as the IOC, FIFA, and

other international sports federations who hold the broadcasting rights to sports events worldwide are perfect partners for national governments.

The ability of a nation to frame attractive images and narratives of its ideas, values, and culture is often called ‘soft power’. The American political scientist Joseph Samuel Nye Jr. coined the term in his 1990 book ‘Bound to Lead’, which challenged the then conventional view of the decline of American power by focusing on other national powers rather than the so-called hard powers such as weapons and money.

“After looking at American military and economic power resources, I felt that something was still missing – the ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than by coercion or payment,” Joseph Nye wrote in 2017 of the origins and political progress of his soft power concept. He developed the concept further in 2004 by stating that “the ability to combine hard and soft power into successful strategies where they reinforce each other could be considered ‘smart power’.”

With or without reading Joseph Nye, his power theories have been adopted by many nations around the world. They have invested massively in culture, tourism and sports to benefit from, among other things, the global fascination linked to the elite sport competitions, the opportunity to communicate national narratives through glamorous opening and closing ceremonies, and the visits from tens of thousands of fans.

Investments in international sport also open doors to the highest levels of global diplomacy and create new business opportunities that can diversify a country’s economy. However, the international limelight that comes with sports events will also bring public awareness to sides of a country that were hidden in the shades.

One of the tiniest countries to pursue soft power has drawn full global attention for more than a decade: Qatar, the richest country in the world per capita, an oil- and gas-producing peninsula in the Middle East ruled by an emir whose monarchy was realising a long-term strategy to gain soft power through sport.



US professor Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” to describe a nation’s ability to affect others by attraction and persuasion rather than by coercion or payment. Photo: VCG/Getty Images

The strategy was intended to make an international name for Qatar and provide some protection for a small country surrounded by much larger nations with hard-power military resources. The investments included – and include – hosting hundreds of events across all kinds of sports, and the FIFA World Cup was the jewel in the crown.



Essential for Qatar's soft power strategy has been the hosting of the World Championship in handball 2015 and hundreds of other international sports events. Here, the Qatari handball team – with many recently naturalised players – celebrates the surprising win over Poland in the semi-final. Photo: Christof Koepsel/Bongarts/Getty Images

The public awareness of Qatar's existence exploded on 2 December 2010 when FIFA controversially elected Russia as the host for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and Qatar as the host country for the 2022 edition.

A few weeks before the selection, The Sunday Times had revealed that members of FIFA's Executive Committee were open to receiving bribes, and FIFA had to suspend two ExCo members. So, FIFA's surprising choice of the first-ever Arab World Cup host caused widespread public suspicion that corruption played a role in the Qatar bid.

Some of these suspicions would later be confirmed.

It was revealed that Qatar had promised FIFA a 100 million US dollar bonus for media rights if the country won the right to host the event, in clear violation of FIFA's own rules.

Moreover, a few days before the vote, French president Nicolas Sarkozy convened a secret lunch at the French presidential palace, where he was joined by UEFA president Michel Platini and the Qatari crown prince Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (who would become Emir in 2013).

This lunch between the three power-brokers and their advisors seems to have played a crucial role in turning the three UEFA votes at FIFA's Executive Committee in Qatar's favour.

French police has for years investigated allegations that a deal was made where Michel Platini would provide the decisive votes in return for Qatar's massive investments in taking over the French football club Paris Saint-Germain, buying broadcasting rights for French football through its agency BeIN Sports, and buying 50 Airbus planes for Qatar Airways.

Lack of labour rights

But Qatar would also become a symbol of another problem: The general lack of labour rights for migrant workers in the Persian Gulf states.

One of the first human rights activists to link Qatar's lack of workers' rights to the 2022 FIFA World Cup was Nicholas McGeehan from Human Rights Watch. Four days after FIFA's election of Qatar, he wrote an article in The Guardian stating that the 2022 World Cup should "not be built on brutality". Criticism of Qatar's victory was not just correct, it was highly necessary:

“Unfortunately, it has been misdirected. While concerns over women’s rights and attitudes to homosexuality (not to mention the irresponsible lunacy of air-conditioning the desert) are entirely valid, there has been no meaningful criticism of what is by far the most problematic aspect of Qatar 2022: the systematic exploitation of the country’s migrant workforce and the possible enslavement of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of impoverished south Asian workers, who will be imported to meet the demands of a constructions sector expected to swell twentyfold from 5 billion to 100 billion US dollars over the next 12 years,” Nicholas McGeehan wrote, adding:

“The massive boom in Qatar’s construction sector will bring hundreds of thousands of South Asian migrant workers into a cultural, politically and socially homogenous region in which slavery’s moral repugnance has not yet been fully recognised, and a country whose labour market was designed to grant employers absolute control over their workers.”

Nicholas McGeehan also noted that hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup represented an opportunity for Qatar to take the lead on workers’ rights in the region. Strikes and trade unions were banned (and still are by 2023). The labour and immigration status of migrants was regulated by the so-called kafala system, which ties each worker to one employer in a highly dependent relationship often characterised by unpaid wages, inhumane living conditions, and unsafe working conditions, sometimes leading to suicides.

A perfect opportunity for unions

Soon, both trade unions and human rights organisations realised that Qatar’s World Cup victory was a perfect opportunity for them to call for worker’s rights and human rights in the entire Gulf region. They began producing reports with facts and narratives supporting their calls for change in Qatar and the region.

In May 2011, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) launched a report uncovering the human costs of a huge migrant labour force in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and proclaimed they would use the report to “put pressure on FIFA and the Qatar 2022 World Cup, for which 12 stadiums are expected to be built over the next ten years.”

While the ITUC had previously called for workers’ rights in relation to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the 2011 report ‘Hidden Faces

of the Gulf Miracle' became the beginning of an even bigger global public campaign for labour rights at major sporting events.

Sharan Burrow, then general secretary of ITUC, promised to hold FIFA's president Sepp Blatter and Qatar's FIFA delegate, construction magnate Mohamad bin Hammam, as well as the labour ministers of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates responsible for improving migrant workers' conditions.

"A huge migrant labour force, with very little rights, no access to any unions, very unsafe practises, and inhuman living conditions, will be literally putting their lives on the line to deliver the 2022 World Cup," Sharan Burrow said, and Ambet Yuson, general secretary of the Building Workers International (BWI), agreed.

"Just 6 per cent of the working population of Qatar is Qatari – their economy and their ability to deliver the World Cup is totally dependent on severe exploitation of migrant labour, which we believe to be barely above the forced labour conditions," Ambet Yuson said.

Pressure on FIFA

In November 2011, ITUC and BWI met with FIFA's general secretary Jerome Valcke to inform him that unless Qatar upheld labour rights, they would campaign against the 2022 World Cup being held in Qatar. They would fight for labour rights approved by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a tripartite UN agency representing governments, employers, and workers since 1919 to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work.

Six months later, the ITUC announced a new investigation into the conditions of workers in Qatar following a visit of Sharan Burrow to Nepal to hear first-hand accounts from workers who had just returned home from the emirate. The investigation was launched with a reference to Nepalese embassy statistics from January to October 2011 which showed that 13 Nepalese migrant workers in Qatar committed suicide and documented 22 work-related deaths and 92 unexplained deaths.

In June 2012, Human Rights Watch released its first major report on the matter titled 'Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar Ahead of FIFA 2022'.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 73 migrant construction workers for the report. All but four of the workers said they paid recruitment fees ranging between 726 and 3,651 US dollars and borrowed from private money lenders at interest rates ranging from 3 to

5 per cent per month to 100 per cent interest on their debts per year. Most of the interviewed migrant workers said they had mortgaged their homes or sold off family property to obtain their jobs. And nearly all of them said that their employers had confiscated their passports, which according to the ILO is “a key indicator of forced labour”.

These reports made Qatar’s organising Supreme Committee promise to establish labour standards that builders and other contractors hired to build the World Cup venues must meet. And FIFA pledged to raise worker rights issues with the government of Qatar.

Human Rights Watch called for additional steps:

“What the international community needs to hear are specific, public, and enforceable commitments from them and the construction companies. FIFA should also push for such action, given its public promise to promote labour rights in Qatar,” Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said.

Harrowing testimonies

The campaigns for workers’ rights and human rights in Qatar didn’t reach a global audience until September 2013 when The Guardian in headlines labelled migrant workers in Qatar as ‘slaves’ and stated that the World Cup construction could “leave 4000 migrant workers dead” before the opening match of the World Cup tournament in 2022.

Citing ITUC, the newspaper said that the annual death toll among those migrants working on building sites in Qatar could rise to 600 a year unless the government in Doha made urgent reforms. The warning came after The Guardian had revealed that 44 Nepalese workers died between 4 June and 8 August 2013, about half of them from heart failure and workplace accidents.

“Nothing of any substance is being done by the Qatari authorities on this issue. The evidence-based assessment of the mortality rate of migrant workers in Qatar shows that at least one worker on average per day is dying,” the ITUC general secretary Sharan Burrow said, noting that with an expected increase of 50 per cent of the migrant workforce, there would be a concomitant increase in deaths.

“We are absolutely convinced they are dying because of conditions of work and life. Everything that The Guardian has found out accords with the information we have gathered from visits to Qatar and Nepal. There are harrowing testimonies from workers in the system there,” Burrow said.



The sufferings of construction workers in the massive infrastructure projects needed for the FIFA World Cup – like the Al-Bayt Stadium (pictured) – caused worldwide debate. Photo: Lars Baron/Bongarts/Getty Images

One month later, the then FIFA president Sepp Blatter admitted that FIFA could not turn a blind eye to the deaths of hundreds of construction workers in Qatar. Under pressure to act on The Guardian's revelations, Sepp Blatter said he would meet with the emir of Qatar to discuss the issue.

In a letter to FIFA released to the media, Hassan Al-Thawadi, head of Qatar's Supreme Committee, said it considered the findings presented by The Guardian to be of the utmost seriousness.

“Our prime minister has personally stated to us his firm and resolute commitment towards ensuring that genuine progress is made in the sphere of workers’ welfare. The health, safety, wellbeing, and dignity of every worker that contributes to staging the 2022 World Cup is of the utmost importance to our committee, and the state of Qatar, and we are steadfastly committed to ensuring that the event acts as a true catalyst towards creating sustainable improvement for every worker in our country,” the letter stated.

But the campaigns did not stop Qatar, the richest country in the world by income per capita. In November 2013, Amnesty International joined the campaigns by releasing its first major report on the issue: ‘The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar’s Construction Sector Ahead of the World Cup’. It was followed up three years later by a second major report on the subject: ‘The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game: Exploitation of Migrant Workers on a Qatar World Cup Site’.

The many reports documented that the conditions for World Cup migrant workers in Qatar had made the fight for human rights in sport a much higher priority to both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International than ever before. But Qatar was not the only country of their attention.

Race to the bottom

The lack of workers’ rights in sport were also highlighted on the eve of the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia.

One year prior to the games, a Human Rights Watch report ‘Race to the Bottom: Exploitation of Migrant Workers Ahead of Russia’s 2014 Winter Games’ concluded that Russia and the IOC should make rigorous monitoring of workers’ rights on Olympic construction sites a top priority to prevent further abuses.

According to the report, the large number of construction projects in Sochi had required an influx of tens of thousands of workers, including over 16,000 migrant workers from countries outside Russia such as Armenia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Serbia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. The migrants said they worked 12-hour shifts seven days a week and earned between 1.80 and 2.60 US dollars an hour.

“The Olympic Games are about excellence and inspiration. The world should not cheer Winter Games in Russia that are built on a foundation of exploitation and abuse,” Jane Buchanan, associate Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said.



Russian anti-gay laws introduced shortly before the Sochi Winter Olympics 2014 triggered worldwide protests like this one in front of the Russian embassy in Madrid. Photo: Denis Doyle/Getty Images

Schizophrenic attitude to LGBT rights

According to Human Rights Watch, the Russian government “unleashed a crackdown on civil society unprecedented in the country’s post-Soviet history” in 2013.

The Russian government “introduced a series of restrictive laws, harassed, intimidated, and in several cases imprisoned political activists, interfered in the work of nongovernmental organisations, and sought to cast government critics as clandestine enemies, thereby threatening the viability of Russia’s civil society,” Human Rights Watch said.

Furthermore, on 1 July 2013, the Russian parliament passed a new legislation outlawing propaganda about “non-traditional” sexual relations to minors. The law was widely criticised for discriminating against homosexuals, but president Vladimir Putin said the legislation was aimed at protecting children against paedophiles only, and that homosexuals attending the Sochi Games should feel at ease so long as they “leave the children in peace”.

The Russian anti-propaganda law caused a major international debate led by gays, lesbians, and trans-people all over the world with strong support from government leaders in many democratic countries, although 40 per cent of all UN member states at the time were criminalising same-sex sexual acts between consenting adults.

“The status of LGBT rights globally is schizophrenic,” Jessica Stern, executive director of the New York-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, told *The Atlantic*, and noted that laws against homosexuality that had recently made international headlines weren’t necessarily new, but they were getting more attention because of the level of progress seen in other countries.

In a June 2013 report titled ‘The Global Divide on Homosexuality’, the Pew Research Institute arrived at similar conclusions, finding broad acceptance of homosexuality in North America, the European Union, and much of Latin America, but equally widespread rejection in predominantly Muslim nations and Africa, as well as parts of Asia and in Russia. The report noted that “acceptance of homosexuality is particularly widespread in wealthy countries where religion is less central in people’s lives”, but that exceptions included Russia and China, where levels of religiosity and tolerance for homosexuality are both low.

LGBT as a scapegoat

Renato Sabbadini, executive director at the Brussels-based International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, told *The Atlantic* that the Russian law could be seen as a means of placating the powerful Russian Orthodox Church and defending “traditional values” in opposition to the West, where LGBT rights were generally advancing. And Boris Dittrich, an advocacy director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, agreed:

“There are always elections coming up in Russia and it makes politicians popular to look for a scapegoat. LGBT people are a scapegoat because people don’t know much about LGBT, they mix it up with paedophilia, bestiality or even think it has something to do with

the devil,” Boris Dittrich told CNN, adding that there weren’t many openly gay or lesbian people in the Russian society that could be seen as role models for people to judge by.

The international protests were supported by political leaders in many Western countries, including the French president Francois Hollande and the British prime minister David Cameron. On the eve of the Sochi Games, US president Barack Obama even appointed an official US delegation composed of three openly gay athletes, tennis player Billy Jean King, ice hockey player Caitlin Cahow, and figure skater Brian Boitano.

Nevertheless, the international protests didn’t result in major boycotts of the Russian 50 billion dollar sports event. The most expensive Olympic Games in history went ahead as planned. However, so many athletes came out as homosexuals in protest of the Russian anti-propaganda law that the Sochi Games became known in some places as ‘The Gay Olympics’. And the media coverage of the protests even overshadowed the coverage of Russia’s exploitation of thousands of poor migrant workers who transformed the Black Sea coast resort into a modern Olympic host city.

But even though the IOC after the Sochi Games introduced a specific anti-discrimination clause to its host city contracts saying that “any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender, or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement”, the clause didn’t stop Russia’s race to the bottom. And other countries took part in the race, too.

Public protests in Brazil

A few months after the Sochi Games, Brazil was hosting the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the first of two global sports events in the country. It was followed by Rio de Janeiro’s hosting of the Olympic Games in 2016, the first Olympics in South America.

When Brazil acquired the rights to host these two global events in 2007 and 2009, respectively, the country’s economy and democratic culture was flourishing and its global influence on the rise.

The events were framed by the Brazilian presidents, first Lula da Silva and then Dilma Rousseff, as a unique opportunity to celebrate Brazilian culture, promote Brazilian tourist attractions, and boost the Brazilian economy. However, one year ahead of the World Cup, Brazil’s hosting of the two events turned into a political nightmare for the government and the president’s Labour Party.

In June 2013, a few weeks prior to Brazil's hosting of the FIFA Confederations Cup, millions of Brazilians took part in some of the largest social rights protests in the country's history. The social unrest began in São Paulo after public transport fares were increased by 10 per cent, but soon an estimated two million people across more than 100 cities took part in the demonstrations, where they protested political corruption, police brutality, forced removal of poor habitations, and the cost of at least 25 billion US dollars to host both the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games.

While the protesters were demanding better health care, education, and transportation for all Brazilians, they were met by heavily armed riot police who responded by firing



“Forced removals” – “Maracanã [stadium] privatized”. The popular protests went from the streets to the stands during FIFA’s Confederations Cup in 2013. Photo: Ronaldo Martínez/Getty Images

teargas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets at the protesters, and sending armoured vehicles into the crowds to disperse the demonstrations. The social unrest went on for two weeks with at least four people dead and hundreds of people injured and arrested.

This was a huge shock to FIFA and to the IOC: How could a people believed to be football fanatics take to the streets and include football and sports leaders as targets of their protests?

On the eve of the World Cup, in June 2014, new demonstrations for social rights hit the streets of more than ten Brazilian cities. Hours before the opening match, riot police fired percussion grenades and teargas at protesters in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo causing Amnesty International to accuse the police of using excessive force.

During the World Cup tournament, an army of police officers managed to prevent the social unrest from growing into new mass protests. But the damage was already done. More than obtaining soft power from hosting the FIFA World Cup, Brazil was suffering from “soft disempowerment”.

The 2014 World Cup became a clear example of how sports mega-events can generate social fragmentation in politically and economically unstable host countries instead of national pride. It showed how growing public distrust in sports organisations led protesters to target both political and sports leaders, pressuring them to stop spending public money on soft power races to the bottom.

Corruption schemes in Rio

Brazil’s challenges did not stop there. At the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, around 30,000 heavily armed police officers and anti-terror specialists from the army were deployed. They managed to prevent new street fights, but there were other obstacles for the Olympic event, particularly the worst economic recession in Brazil for decades.

Furthermore, a few months prior to the Olympic opening ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff became involved in an impeachment process after a year-long police investigation of corruption involving the state-run oil firm Petrobras and several of the engineering companies that built the Olympic venues.

The companies caught up in the Petrobras probe “very probably” broke laws against price-fixing and bribery on contracts to build Olympic venues, Igor Romario, a Federal Police chief who was a key figure in the Brazilian investigation, told Reuters:

“In every situation where there has been an investigation into contracts with these



In the lead-up to the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan's ruler Ilham Aliyev ordered the arrest of many journalists and human rights activists, the barring of international foreign correspondents, and a ban on Amnesty International, Rebecca Vincent and Gulnara Akhundova told Play the Game 2015. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

companies, this model of corruption was repeated. It's possible that it was repeated in the projects for the 2016 Olympics.”

Today we know it was not only possible, but actually happened. Several Brazilian politicians and sports leaders are serving jail sentences for corruption related to Rio 2016.

At Play the Game's conference in 2017, former Brazilian football player Rai Oliveira said the legacy of the 2016 Olympics included abandoned venues, a reduction in public resources for sport, and a corruption crisis in Brazil's National Olympic committee.

On top of that, Patrick Hickey, an Irish IOC Executive Board member and president of the European Olympic Committees (EOC), was arrested by the police during the Rio Olympics and put to prison following an investigation of illegal reselling of Olympic tickets. An unprecedented violation of the impunity that international sports leaders most often take for granted.

Hickey's case has not come to a conclusion in Brazil, but in 2022 he officially withdrew from his Olympic roles after six years of 'self-suspension'.

Embezzling with impunity

Before Brazil, the Irish IOC member had played a key role when 'sportswashing' made it to the global agenda.

In 2015, the London-based Sport for Rights campaign was set up to draw attention to Azerbaijan's bad human rights records ahead of and during its hosting of the first-ever European Games, and it used the term to point at Azeri dictator Ilham Aliyev.

"The authoritarian regime of Ilham Aliyev is using the games to present an image of itself as a progressive nation, but in reality, Azerbaijan is a country where dissenting journalists and activists are brutally repressed while the president and his cronies engage in corruption and embezzlement with impunity," Sport for Rights wrote in a press briefing, adding:

"Azerbaijan is engaged in sportswashing, attempting to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events including the European Grand Prix 2016, matches in the 2020 European football championship, and this month, Olympic spin-off the European Games. The Azerbaijani government hopes the games will 'showcase Azerbaijan as a vibrant and modern European nation of great achievement'. To this end, President Aliyev has invested 6.5 billion US dollars in the games, building venues across Baku. The regime is paying for all travel and accommodation for visiting teams."

The European Games was invented in 2012 by the EOC, an umbrella body for 50 national Olympic committees in Europe, back then headed by the Irish IOC member Patrick Hickey.

Prior to the games, Patrick Hickey said that "Baku 2015 will come to life through the dedication and effort of your entire country", and that it had been "an absolute pleasure working with the Azerbaijani leadership."

This evaluation did not surprise British investigative journalist Andrew Jennings:

"Hickey gets cosy with people many of us wouldn't invite home to meet our loved ones. Seeking a wealthy patron in Europe to pay for a regional Olympics to mirror the Pan-American Games and not finding any takers among reputable leaders, Hickey turned to the president of the national committee of Belarus, whose day job is being Europe's last dictator," Andrew Jennings told Sport for Rights.

“But Lukashenko is broke, so Hickey pursued the oil-rich president of the Azerbaijan Olympic Committee, another head of state. A noted kleptomaniac and jailer of journalists, Ilham Aliyev has reportedly offered millions to fund the event in 2015.”

Aliyev had certainly made sure the games would become a family event – for his own family. Not only was he presiding over both the country and the National Olympic Committee. He appointed his wife, Mehriban Aliyev, as head of the Organising Committee of the European Games, and his daughters were deeply involved in business related to the event.

After the European Games in Baku, Rebecca Vincent and Gulnara Akhundova, human rights activists at the Sport for Rights campaign, attended Play the Game’s 2015 conference in Aarhus.

The activists spoke of an atmosphere in Azerbaijan reminiscent of the former communist era in the country and said that Ilham Aliyev’s desire to avoid criticism of his national soft power strategy had resulted in the arrest of many journalists and human rights activists, the barring of international foreign correspondents, and a ban on Amnesty International.

“Failing to take a stand is helping nations like Azerbaijan to sportswash their image,” Rebecca Vincent said

Mega-events come with oppression

Research published in 2022 at the University of Copenhagen shows that the hosting of mega-events inspires more repression rather than reform in authoritarian regimes. The global limelight contains dangers for those in power, says professor Adam Scharpf.

“Their political opponents can use the sporting events to demonstrate their discontent under the indirect protection of foreign journalists. This is why the autocrats come down hard on their critics before the sporting events take place,” explains Adam Scharpf.

The research echoed what Jules Boykoff, a professor of politics and government at the Pacific University in Oregon, argued at Play the Game 2017: Citizens often experience severe restrictions on their right to protest during such events despite legitimate concerns that they are funded at the expense of, for example, public health and social welfare.

Jules Boykoff referred to “greenwashing”, or sponsors paying lip service to environmental concerns at mega-events, as well as forced evictions and the “militarisation of the public sphere”.

Likewise, Minky Worden, director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch, added that human rights violations often increase as global mega-events grow in scale, resulting in disregard for the rights of minorities, abuse of migrant workers, and repression of journalists and demonstrators.

As an example, Minky Worden pointed out that China had pledged to implement reforms before being awarded the Olympic Games but following the award of the 2008 Games to Beijing, its human rights record worsened. Something that did not prevent the IOC from awarding Beijing the 2022 Olympic Winter Games.

Violent attacks on gays

“Research has shown that if you award a mega-event to an authoritarian regime, you will create human rights abuses. We must recognise that these nations want the games to gain soft power,” Minky Worden said prior to Russia’s hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

Before the first whistle of that World Cup, Graeme Reid, director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, argued that “the well-founded fear of activists in Russia” that the anti-propaganda law introduced before the Sochi Olympics “would not only restrict freedom of expression but would send a message that the government condoned homophobia, leaving gay people vulnerable to violence and abuse”.

The passing of the law coincided with a ratcheting up of homophobic rhetoric in state media and a dramatic increase in attacks by vigilante groups and individuals who preyed on young gay men, lured them via dating apps to fake rendezvous, and beat, humiliated, and tortured them.

“The attackers filmed these attacks and posted the footage on social media, including images of them attacking the men they perceived as gay, confident of their impunity. As expected, the police failed to recognise the attacks as hate crimes,” Graeme Reid said, adding that sport may have moved on, but LGBT Russians don’t have that luxury:

“Despite the furor, the facts on the ground for LGTB Russians were not changed. The four years since Sochi have been marked by discrimination and brutal anti-gay violence, and while the focus of the international media has long ago moved on, Putin’s ‘traditional values’ continue to do immeasurable damage.”

Putin the winner

To Minky Worden, the FIFA World Cup in Russia was the first test of FIFA’s new Human Rights Policy from 2017 that included zero tolerance for discrimination based on sexual orientation. After the tournament, she labelled the event “Russia’s bloody World Cup” and framed it as “a preventable own goal” for FIFA.

“FIFA’s flagship tournament could have done something to relieve the worst human rights crisis in Russia since the Soviet era, but instead the football organisation condoned



“If England had won, would anyone have questioned the result?” asked the head of the FIFA World Cup organisers in Qatar, Hassan Al-Thawadi, when confronting critics at Play the Game in 2017. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game

many human rights violations, undermining its own policies. Russian president Vladimir Putin emerged as the big winner, using the games to sportswash his rule – to legitimize it by hosting a sporting mega-event,” the director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch said.

Minky Worden noted that from Russia’s escalating crackdown on peaceful critics to its unwelcoming anti-propaganda law to workers dying when building new stadiums, the World Cup did little to counter Russia’s rights abuses. According to Building Workers International (BWI) at least 21 World Cup workers died. And Josimar, a Norwegian investigative magazine, exposed that at least 110 North Korean forced labourers worked at the World Cup venue Zenit Arena in St. Petersburg.

“Beyond worker abuses, the World Cup gave one of Russia’s worst human rights violators, the Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov, a global platform to launder his reputation. Russia’s Chechnya province is home to some of the country’s worst human rights violations. Kadyrov is known to publicly condone honour killings, order house burnings, and openly threaten journalists and human rights defenders,” Minky Worden said.

“In 2017, Kadyrov presided over a horrific and unprecedented anti-LGBT purge, as Chechnya’s security forces rounded up men perceived to be gay, tortured them, and forcibly abducted some. Kadyrov denied it, proclaiming in an interview with HBO: ‘We don’t have such people here. We don’t have any gays, to purify our blood. If there are any, take them’. In a later interview, he pretended he was unable even to pronounce the word homosexual.”

Nevertheless, the FIFA World Cup moved on to Qatar, despite ongoing violations of workers’ rights and human rights in the country, including discrimination of women, under the rule of its emir since 2013, the powerful IOC member Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

Delivering on the unimaginable

Hassan Al-Thawadi, head of Qatar’s organising Supreme Committee, did not shy away from confronting his critics when speaking at Play the Game 2017 in Eindhoven in the Netherlands. There, he defended his nation by describing its winning World Cup bid as ‘top notch’.

“If England had won, would anyone have questioned the result? No one claimed that the whole system was flawed before the bidding process was complete. We have always been open and transparent,” he argued.

Hassan Al-Thawadi denied that Qatar had bought the World Cup and maintained that his nation had been cleared of any wrongdoing by a 2014 report from the then FIFA Ethics Committee chairman Michael J. Garcia and added that issues related to work and welfare are “not unique to Qatar”.

The Qatari argued that due to the extreme heat, the region had never hosted such a major event, but today’s state-of-the-art stadium cooling technology had made it possible. To Hassan Al-Thawadi, the World Cup in Qatar would even serve as a platform to help “heal the wounds of the region” and allow people in the Middle East to interact with those from other countries.

“It’s easy to be cynical. We are living in a world that pokes holes in our dreams. But we are delivering on the unimaginable,” Al-Thawadi said.

However, in October 2022 on the eve of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Amnesty International released a report that recognised some progress but concluded the host country still had a long way to go. The report ‘Unfinished Business: What Qatar must do to fulfil promises on migrant workers’ rights’ stated that after years of denial and inaction, reforms of Qatar’s labour system didn’t come about before 2017 under a three-year agreement with the ILO with the aim of dismantling “the toxic kafala sponsorship system, tackle wage abuse, enhance health and safety measures, prevent and prosecute forced labour, and promote worker’s voices.”

The report contained a plan for action, calling for Qatar to address gaps and remaining weaknesses in its labour reform process, end forced labour, protect domestic workers, investigate workers’ deaths, strengthen heat protections, expand the scope of the workers’ welfare standards, fully end the kafala system, allow trade unions, increase the minimum wage, tackle recruitment abuses, strengthen remedy mechanisms, and compensate historic abuses.

Both Qatar and FIFA ignored calls for compensating the families of those migrant workers who had returned to their poor countries in body bags or with crippling diseases caused by the working conditions.

When FIFA held its 73rd congress in Rwanda in March 2023, the Guardian quoted a coalition of eight global union federations, including BWI, for saying that migrant

workers were facing deteriorating conditions since the World Cup, with rogue employers “emboldened by an absence of enforcement and growing confidence that rights violations will go unpunished”.

Qatargate at the heart of EU

Furthermore, a corruption scandal dubbed Qatargate was exposed on 9 December 2022 when the Greek member of the European Parliament, Eva Kaili, was arrested in a case of cash-for-favours scheme involving large sums of money and gifts allegedly paid by Qatar and Morocco to influence decision-making inside the European Parliament.

Both countries denied any wrongdoing, but the Belgian police seized more than 1.5 million euro in cash during raids around Brussels and arrested six suspects, including Luca Visentini, a then newly elected general secretary of ITUC who was later dismissed from his post.

Visentini admitted receiving 50,000 euro from the NGO ‘Fight Impunity’ run by former MEP Pier Panzeri who allegedly ran the bribery ring and confessed to distributing cash bribes on behalf of Qatar and Morocco to influence European politicians. But the ITUC said an external audit report had found “no evidence of donations from either Qatar or Morocco influencing the ITUC’s policies or programmes”.

Eva Kaili was one of the European Parliament’s 14 vice presidents. In early November 2022, she travelled to Qatar and held meetings with Qatari top leaders, including the prime minister, to discuss bilateral relations. A few weeks later, the Greek defended Qatar’s labour rights publicly, and in December 2022 she voted in favour of visa liberation for Qatari and Kuwaiti citizens inside the EU.

According to Europe News, Kaili defended her innocence but spent four months in prison before she on 12 April 2023 was given an electronic bracelet and moved to house arrest. But Qatar’s hard rulers of soft power on sport’s global playground walked free.

Genocide and games

Likewise, the 2008 Olympics did little to improve human rights in China. In April 2021, the Human Rights Watch report ‘Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots’ concluded that human rights crimes in China had reached “unprecedented levels that make the Chi-

nese government guilty of the worst human rights crackdown in China since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989.”

Two months later, Amnesty International’s secretary general Agnès Callamard released the report ‘Like we were enemies in a war’ and said the report documented that the Chinese authorities had created “a dystopian hellscape on a staggering scale” that threatens to deprive Muslim minorities in China of their religious and cultural identities.

On that backdrop, an international boycott campaign was launched to stop the 2022 Winter Olympics from being hosted in China.

The campaigners called on the IOC to move the Olympics away from Beijing because of the Chinese government’s human rights violations against one million Uyghurs and other Muslims that researchers estimated had been detained in 400 re-education camps, detention centres, and prisons in Xinjiang.

While the Chinese government framed its use of hard power against Muslim minorities as a necessary part of a national “war on terror”, the then US secretary of state Mike Pompeo in January 2021 accused China of “genocide and crimes against humanity”.

Even though most democratic countries in Europe and North America decided on a diplomatic boycott of the Olympic Winter Games in Beijing that protesters labelled ‘The Genocide Games’, Olympic athletes and national Olympic committees followed the IOC and took part in the games.

“It is for other governments to deal with the Chinese government in a meaningful way, not by sacrificing their own athletes in a gesture that they know will not be effective. My sense is that governments are too conflicted to engage in concerted action directed at China,” Richard W. Pound, the then longest-serving IOC member, told Play the Game. He admitted that China’s hard power strategies weren’t necessarily in line with the principles of the Olympic Charter.

“They may not be, but the IOC and the Olympic Movement must exist and operate in a world that is far from perfect. We can use the Games to show that peaceful interaction can still exist even in a divided world.”



Chinese President Xi Jinping was mostly accompanied by representatives of authoritarian states when he opened the Beijing Olympics in 2022. Democratic leaders stayed away to signal their opposition to China's brutal oppression of the Muslim Uyghur minority. Photo: Anthony Wallace/Pool/Getty Images



The political power of the Olympic opening ceremony: Lessons from Beijing and Sochi

In an article released on 19 January 2022, just before the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Play the Game's senior analyst Stanis Elsborg illustrated how the Chinese and Russian regimes employed the opening ceremonies for political purposes during their hosting of the previous Olympic Games in 2008 and 2014, respectively.



The Chinese flag was carried by Chinese children wearing national costumes representing all 56 ethnicities in China. A message of ethnic integration. Photo: Vladimir Rys / Getty Images

[...] In the opening ceremony at the 2008 Olympics, there were about 100 [TV] clips that were different between the national and the international version.

[...] Above all, the camera was seeking Hu Jintao, who appeared 23 times in the Chinese version against only seven times in the international version, which instead continued to show the actual artistic programme on stage.

The Chinese president was also used in a geopolitical manner. During the parade of nations, the Chinese version of the opening ceremony zoomed in on Hu Jintao when Hong Kong and 'Chinese Taipei', as Taiwan is called at the Olympics, entered the stadium. When Hu Jintao is shown in connection with Taiwan, it can be interpreted as a sign of China's geopolitical aspirations for Taiwan.

The showing of Hu Jintao and Hong Kong at the same time can be seen as a signal to the Chinese people that Hong Kong – despite its independent Olympic status – has returned to the motherland. [...]

Of course, the unrest in Xinjiang before the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the Tibetan Uprising was not highlighted during the opening ceremony. Instead,

the Chinese organisers used the opportunity to send a message of ethnic integration in China.

Children in national costumes from the 56 different ethnic groups in China, including Tibetans and Uyghurs, carried the national flag into the stadium before handing it to Chinese military personnel who oversaw the hoisting of the flag. It later turned out that the children were not at all representatives from all the different ethnicities, but only from the ethnic group of Han Chinese, which makes up 92 per cent of the population [...] It would not be a surprise if the 2022 Beijing opening ceremony would contain similar scenes.

[Ed. This actually happened and was analysed in a later article by the same author on Play the Game's website].

As an example of the personal worship of Russian President Vladimir Putin, he was shown 40 times in the Russian version of the opening ceremony against only 16 times in the international version.

That was not the only difference in the versions of the opening ceremony in Sochi. The Russian flag was displayed 335 times in the Russian version of the opening ceremony and only 117 times in the international version. In the months leading up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Putin tabled a bill in parliament for wider use of state symbols such as the flag and national anthem saying “[Watching] the flying of the state flag and listening to the anthem will bring our citizens back... to patriotic feelings.” [...]

The close ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state in Putin's Russia were also staged in the



Dancers with inflatable balloons symbolising the St. Basil's Cathedral and the close relationship between church and state in today's Russia at the opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

Photo: Bruce Bennett / Getty Images

opening ceremony in Sochi 2014. In an introductory video sequence that kicked off the ceremony, the Church was portrayed in the form of the St. Basil's Cathedral on the Red Square under the letter 'bl', which means 'we'. St. Basil's Cathedral with its characteristic onion domes was shown alongside the main character of the opening ceremony, a little girl called Lubov, meaning 'love', and the Kremlin buildings, which house President Putin and his administration.

It could be seen as a symbol that the 'we' of Russia today is building on a unit of Putin's Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Opening a difficult dialogue

“I was surprised that we did not speak more about sport.”

The remark from the vice director of media and communication for the Beijing 2008 Olympics, Sun Weijia, fell as he and his delegation left Play the Game 2002 and said goodbye to the hosts. It was one of the first occasions, if not *the* first, where the Chinese Olympic hosts decided to embark on a dialogue with their critics far away from their home turf.

To Play the Game’s knowledge, it was also the last.

Sun Weijia put himself in a hot spot, having accepted half an hour’s unrestricted debate after his presentation of the aims of the Beijing Olympics. He expressed his belief that the games would leave a legacy of significant progress in Beijing’s infrastructure, provide greater international exposure for the nation’s culture, and further integrate China into the global community.

These themes did not concern the audience much. Instead, Sun Weijia was met with a wave of questions about human rights from journalists, human rights NGOs, and academics.

“We do attach great importance to the improvement of human rights, but we think that different national situations, different backgrounds, and different stages of development can lead to different needs in so far as human rights,” Weijia said, referring to the huge size of the Chinese population.

“The biggest demand in my view is the legitimate claim for development, a better life. Over the past 20 years, the Chinese government has succeeded in improving the living standards for all these people, and I think this is the biggest contribution a country can make to the cause of human rights.”

Reporter Olukayode Thomas of Nigeria then asked what a high standard of living is worth without freedom.

“In China, freedom for everybody is guaranteed by the constitution,” countered Sun Weijia.

“The staging of the Olympics will certainly improve democratisation and modernisation of China – but that doesn’t mean that we are not a democratic country now.”

The questions continued: The ban on the religious group Falun Gong, the oppression of the Tibetans, press freedom, public executions, and the selling of the executed prisoner’s organs to foreign patients. Sun Weijia summed his answers up by acknowledging the importance of human rights:

“But I could never understand the approach that consists in taking your criteria for human rights in your country and for your people, and imposing these criteria for other countries,” Weijia replied.

The Olympics could improve China

The dialogue with China continued at the next Play the Game conference in 2005 where professor Hai Ren from Beijing Sport University also stressed the context of rapid economic growth and social change, noting that “the income gaps have widened dramatically.”

“China used to be poor but homogenous, but now a polarising trend has suddenly appeared. Some have succeeded in the social and economic transition into prosperity, but others have suffered from stagnation and social turbulence,” he said, warning that inequality had reached an “alarming degree”.

He saw the Olympics as an exercise for the Chinese to learn how to respect and cooperate with each other. The transition from a traditional society with many self-sufficient small farmers to a state-planned economic structure became dominant and continued for nearly half a century. “So how to cooperate with each other based on legitimate principles is still a big lesson for Chinese to learn,” Hai Ren explained.

“The Beijing Olympics may provide a chance to change the situation mainly through the Olympic volunteer campaign,” said Hai Ren referring to a survey from Beijing which showed that 94 per cent of all respondents wanted to be volunteers at the Olympic Games.

To realise the slogan ‘Humanistic Olympics’ would also take great effort, Hai Ren said.

“Due to various reasons, from policy-making to media coverage, in the minds of many Chinese the



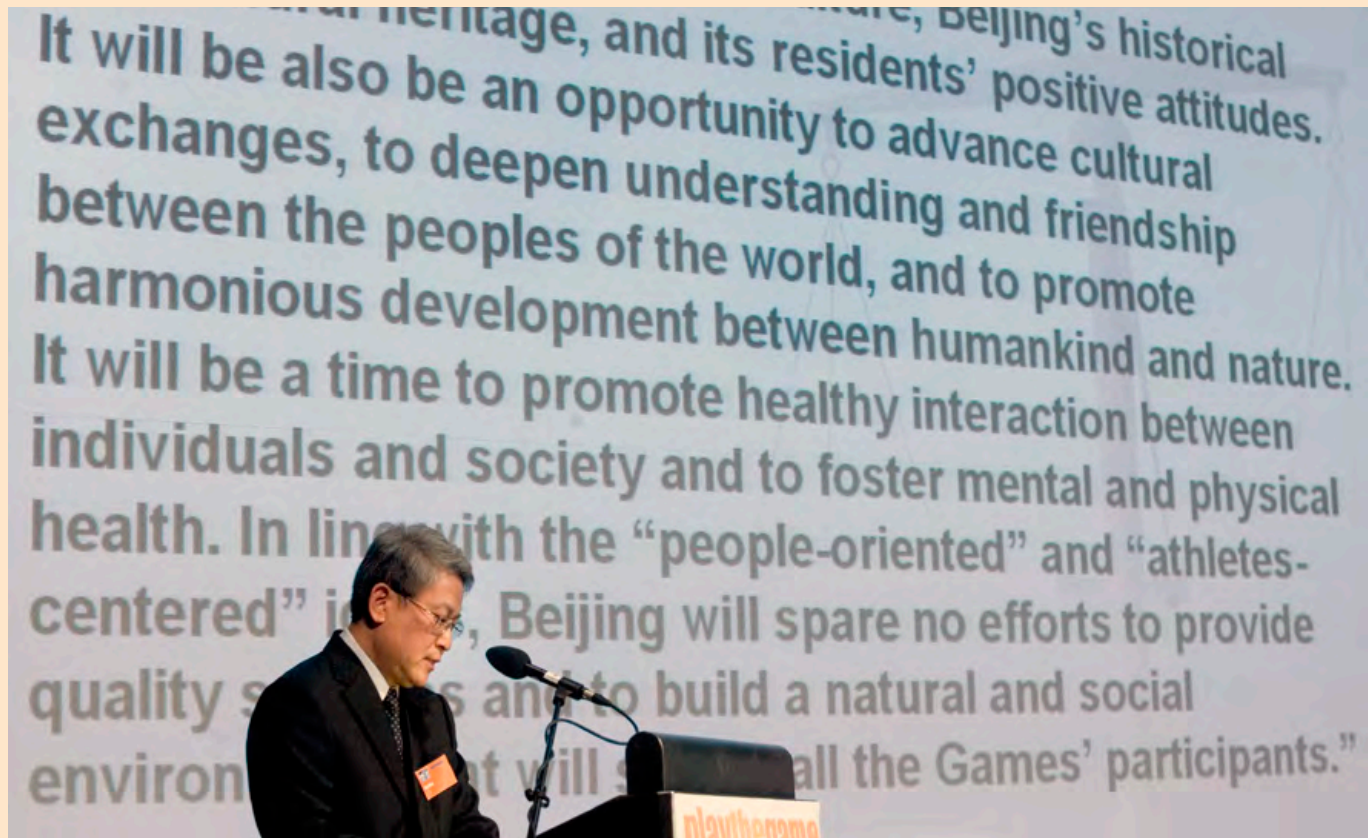
When meeting a wave of critical questions in 2002, the deputy head of media relations for the Beijing 2008, Sun Weijia, insisted on every nation’s right to have its own interpretation of human rights.

Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game

Olympic Games consist of superstars meeting far away from ordinary people. Perhaps this is the reason that the BOCOG referred to the Humanistic Olympics as the People's Olympics to correct the wrong ideas."

"The Humanistic Olympics are intended to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between China and

the world, but the question is how to make this happen and lead the understanding to a deeper and more comprehensive level. It cannot be achieved merely by demonstrations at the Olympic ceremonies or art exhibitions. It demands various sorts of interactive cultural activities participated in by both natives and visitors."



Professor Hai Ren acknowledged challenges connected to the rapid growth in China and hoped the Olympics would help overcome and facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game

Testing media freedom

Play the Game chose to pursue its own project of cross-cultural understanding when it launched 'Play the Game for open journalism' in collaboration with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 2008.

The project was based on a website that aimed to assist around 10,000 foreign correspondents at the Beijing Olympics who would operate under a new media law. Two delegates from the project were present at the Games, giving advice and gathering information about the experience of journalists.

While most sports journalists were largely happy with the conditions they were working under during the Olympics, many of those following events off the field of play had problems.

There were hundreds of violations of media freedom rules for foreign correspondents during the Olympics, including the roughing up of photographers, detention of journalists, intimidation of sources, and blocked access to politically sensitive hotspots within China.

Based on the evidence gathered under the Beijing Olympics, the project concluded by giving five recommendations:

- Recent legislation allowing for freer working conditions for foreign journalists must also be extended to Chinese journalists.
- Restrictions on free coverage of certain subjects of vital importance to Chinese society, such as Falun Gong, Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan should be lifted.
- Sources must enjoy the same freedom as journalists to speak freely.

- China must ensure that local police and other authorities understand the rules for the media.
- China must deal with the cultural challenge to promote a debate about achieving its aims of a harmonious society while allowing for critical and independent journalism.

There were many clear signs that the project delegates in China were monitored, but their work was not impeded. However, when Play the Game's director Jens Sejer Andersen visited an international academic conference with 1,500 participants in the week before the Olympics, his communication was clearly intercepted and conversations with Chinese researchers were interrupted by officials.

"I was not completely surprised that I was under surveillance, but I had expected the system to act more discreetly," Andersen said. It was a very different experience when he was invited to give lectures on sports governance, corruption and crime in 2013 at the Beijing Sport University.

"In China, you must of course be respectful of the conditions your hosts are working under, but I found a very open atmosphere in which the students and I could have lively discussions about the role of civil society, as well as the risks of corruption in top-down controlled monopoly systems, like sport. The political climate in China and the world has changed, but hopefully, there will be room to discuss integrity and democratic values in sport also in the future."

Hunting white elephants

White elephants is the name given to prestigious sports facilities that are left without any reasonable function once the last athlete has left the event. In 2011, Play the Game and the Danish Institute for Sports Studies involved colleagues all over the world to register how 75 stadiums in 20 countries were used after they had been constructed for major events.

The report 'Word Stadium Index: Stadiums built for major sporting events – bright future or future burden?' concluded that large stadium facilities are very difficult to fill.

It is mainly the public purse that ends up covering the costs, and in the worst cases, the maintenance becomes a significant burden on the local community. It speaks for itself that by 2011, 31 of the report's 35 football stadiums used for World Cups since 2002 had public owners.

The picture was even more glaring if you compared the costs of construction to the economic strength of the host nations. Nigeria's 426 million US dollars Abuja National Stadium seats approximately 60,000 spectators and was built in 2003 amid allegations of corruption. The price per seat was equivalent to three times the annual purchasing power of the average Nigerian.

The centrepiece of the report is the so-called 'stadium index', which compares each stadium's total attendance in 2010 to its capacity, thereby providing a measure of utilisation that is more comprehensive than just the number of events.

The best-utilised stadium in the study is the downgraded Olympic stadium from the 1996 Summer Olympics, Atlanta's Turner Field, which in 2010 attracted over 2.5 million spectators. With a capacity of over 49,000, it boasts an impressive stadium index of 50.6. The score can be attributed to the local baseball team, the Atlanta Braves, who plays to full houses in a large number of games throughout the season.

At the opposite end of the scale – not without some irony – is another Olympic stadium that has been converted for baseball, Nagano's exhibition stadium from the 1998 Winter Olympics, which only attracted a total of just under 18,000 spectators in 2010 despite a capacity of 30,000. This gives it a stadium index of 0.6. Baseball is strong in Japan, but the Nagano stadium is not home to an attractive team.

The average score of 13.4 illustrates that mega-events often lead to the construction of venues that are not needed locally. Portugal's hosting of the European Football Championship in 2004 is a cautionary tale in point.

Three venues have a stadium index of less than 3, and the report questions whether Portugal should have organised the European Championship on its own in the first place. The contrast with Germany's hosting of the 2006 World Cup is striking. While the German stadiums have an average utilisation index of 16.2, the stadiums in Portugal have an average utilisation index of 8.8.

Predictions for Brazil verified

In 2012, Play the Game made a prediction about the use after the event of the 12 stadiums built or renovated for the FIFA World Cup in Brazil. By analysing local football attendance and other expected events, Play the Game predicted that not one of the 12 stadiums would reach the international average of 13.4 points. The prediction was made public at a Play the Game Day in São Paulo and attracted much national attention. A story on the news site uol.com had 100,000 readers within a few hours.

11 years later, researchers from Inteligência Esportiva Institute at the Federal University of Paraná checked the predictions for each stadium for the years 2015-2019 and 2022. Some scored better, some worse than the predictions, but no stadium reached the international average, although the Neo Química Arena in Brazil's biggest city São Paulo came close with a score of 13.0.

The worst scores were achieved by Arena Pantanal in central Brazil and the National Stadium of the capital Brasilia with 0.8 and 0.9, respectively. So typically, these two stadiums could not gather enough people over a full year to fill the number of seats available.

In 2007, the Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) estimated the total costs for building and renovating the stadiums to be around 3.8 billion US dollars. Recent reports from state auditors and the Ministry of Sport have calculated the total price to be six to seven times higher – mostly paid by public money.

Find the World Stadium Index at www.playthegame.org



The National Stadium of Brazil was renovated at great costs for the 2023 FIFA Confederations Cup and the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Since then, the stadium would not be filled even if all visitors during a year arrived on the same day. Photo: Shaun Botterill/Getty Images