

# Communication Strategy Effects in the Political System during Global Sport Mega-Events: Russia on the Eve of the FIFA World Cup 2018

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how well organized strategic communication during sport events can prevent and even stop internal and external national conflicts and can strengthen the cohesiveness of society within the country. It analyses the possibilities of strategic communication, stages, or risk, and it examines global sporting events such as FIFA Confederations Cup and FIFA World Cup, regarding their ability to change the image of Russia on the world stage.

*Keywords:* strategic communication, FIFA world Cup 2018, FIFA Confederations Cup, crisis communication, social networking, conflict communication, domestic politics

## Россия накануне Чемпионата мира по футболу-2018: влияние стратегической коммуникации на политическую систему в ходе глобальных спортивных мероприятий

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## РЕФЕРАТ

В статье анализируется, насколько хорошо организованная стратегическая коммуникация во время спортивного мероприятия может предотвратить и даже остановить внутренние и внешние национальные конфликты и укрепить сплоченность общества внутри страны. Анализируются глобальные спортивные мероприятия, такие как Кубок Конфедераций и Чемпионат мира по футболу, их возможность на изменение имиджа России на мировой арене.

*Ключевые слова:* стратегическая коммуникация, Чемпионат мира по футболу-2018, Кубок Конфедераций, кризисная коммуникация, социальные сети, субъекты коммуникации, конфликтная коммуникация

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Nowadays, when countries inside the EU as well as many other countries, are experiencing processes of separatism, we will focus on how well organized strategic communication during a sport mega-event can help prevent and even reduce internal and external national conflicts and can strengthen political cohesiveness of society within a country.

The idea about sport events as an instrument that unifies and reconciles nations comes from the Olympic Games of ancient Greece, when a sacred truce was declared when the games were played.

This has become common in contemporary society, since sport events and politics rather often coalesce, so transforming strategic communications technology is a key

political issue; a new section of applied sociology is actively used to prepare and conduct sport events. Strategic communication, which has become very popular in the US, is gradually spreading away to Russia now. Communication theory belongs to the so-called post-non-classical sciences, and strategic communication is a new branch of science in our information society. It is possible to gradually change public opinion about an event, or predispose public opinion for future events with the help of strategic communication.

Indeed, through ongoing sports events in Russia, with the help of strategic communications, used by all possible media, is being utilized to try to change world opinion not only about sports (or just football) in Russia, but about Russia's image in general.

Thus, strategic communications are given in the normative-value dimension of social space, and are aimed to form new values, meanings and social norms, or to change the ones we've already measured in public opinion. New values and meanings that in the future will determine the behavior of individuals or social groups of citizens of certain countries. Therefore, in this article we will consider the non-materialistic explanation of social action, from the understanding that consciousness determines existence, and so contradicting Karl Marx<sup>1</sup> and completely in agreement with Pitirim Sorokin<sup>2</sup> and Max Weber<sup>3</sup>.

In German sources, we come across the term *strategic communications* primarily with reference to commercial communications. Firstly, an organizational strategy is formed (the mission of the organization, its position in the market), then the communication strategy is chosen (the purpose of communication, the channel of communication and its relevance, the features of the target audience are clarified), and finally, communication tactics come into play.

We identify a quite different understanding of strategic communications in English-speaking literature, especially from American authors: «In the US, strategic communication is defined as: the purposeful efforts of the United States government in understanding and attracting key audiences to create, strengthen or maintain favorable conditions for improving the position of the United States government, its interests, policies and goals through the use of agreed programs, plans ...»<sup>4</sup>.

Strategic communications is a new field of knowledge, and as it is still undergoing its development, the available materials and improvements are logically affected by the discernibility of borders and the absence of a single universally recognized understanding of the basic concepts, primarily the very concept of strategic communications itself.

Vladimir Kvint, a Bretton-Woods committee member, the contemporary founder of strategic thinking, Russian-American scholar<sup>5</sup>, wrote in his book:

«The importance of true strategic thoughts and strategy itself is often neglected or ignored in the modern world. While *de facto* strategic thought has been used for hundreds and thousands of years in military and governmental capacities, the knowledge and concrete understanding of the phenomenon of strategy didn't exist... Strategy still remains surprisingly underestimated, misused, or misunderstood within certain powerful corporations, governments, and military bodies»<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marks «Das Kapital».

<sup>2</sup> Pitirim Sorokin «Social and Cultural Dynamics».

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber «The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism».

<sup>4</sup> Joint Publication 1-02: «Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms», Washington D. C., 12 April 2001 (as amended through 17 March 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Since 2002, he heads the Economic Council of the State Committee for Sport of Russia, and from 2004 to 2008 Ministry of Sport of the Russian Federation. Since 2009, V. Kvint is the chairman of the Expert Council for Physical Culture and Sports of the Federation Council Sports Commission. Since 2017, Deputy Chairman of the Expert Council under the State Duma Committee for Physical Culture, Sport, Tourism and Youth Affairs.

<sup>6</sup> Kvint, V. *Strategy for the Global Market*. NY, Routledge, 2016, P. 3.

The same goes to strategic communication as well, corporations and governments often use it without realizing the background theory and the basic rules of it, doing correct things intuitively and making mistakes that could be avoided.

If we agree with Vladimir Kvint in his definition of strategy that it is «wisdom with a defined vector to success and with an assessment of resource limitations»<sup>1</sup>, the strategic communication's definition is very close to that.

So, we can define *strategic communication* as a complex plan of communicative measures through all available communicative channels with a defined vector, aimed in forming long-lasting positive attitudes towards a subject, among a target audience, realizing though all limitations and drawbacks of this subject, and nevertheless, directing to the advantages and opportunities that it gives for a target audience.

We need to argue about this matter in a deeper way. The key question focuses on what is strategic communication? Strategic communications appeared in the United States, more accurately at the State Department or the Department of Defense. In any case, the birthplace of this term determines its significance for the United States and for those countries to which strategic communications are directed. Thus, the users of strategic communications are always stable social institutions that have a long-term development strategy and act in accordance with it. According to this, we can also determine the object of strategic communication — the target groups **consciousness** (sometimes **sub-consciousness**) and **behavior** (the sample size of an object of strategic communication is determined by its subject.).

From the report of the White House to the Congress of the USA from March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010, «National framework of strategic communication»:

*«We refer to strategic communication:*

*A) synchronization of words and deeds, and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as...*

*B) programs and activities that are consciously aimed at communication and engagement of target audiences, including those carried out through public relations, public diplomacy and information operations»<sup>2</sup>.*

And both in business and in politics, strategic communications can be attributed to their orientation top down. So, we are mostly dealing with descending communications. They include the implementation of the goals and strategies adopted by top-level managers, orders and instructions, formal rules and procedures, evaluation of the performance of junior staff, and the introduction of organizational culture standards. The understanding of strategic communication as «the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences»<sup>3</sup>, in our opinion, should be clarified and somewhat corrected.

In strategic communication, we should distinguish three different levels:

- A) massive information preparation that precedes the actual planned actions («cases»), be it cultural, sports, financial, economic or political actions. This preparatory stage of strategic information communication can be likened to a powerful artillery training, conducted just before the planned military offensive<sup>4</sup>.
- B) The second level of strategic communication is the current information support for ongoing actions («cases») — economic, political, sports, cultural, military ect.
- C) The third and final level of strategic communication is the stage of fixing the desired information after effect. These are the information events that are held after

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Publication 1-02: «Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms», Washington D. C., 12 April 2001 (as amended through 17 March 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> We recall that strategy as a science originates from military affairs as described at the Ancient Greece and Roman Republic.

the completion of real actions in order to create the desired sustainable perception of these actions in the target audience: press releases, press conferences, etc.

We can also talk about the intensity of communication technologies and the difference in impact on the recipient. «The specificity of high-intensity technologies lies in the fact that they allow for a short period of time to implement changes in the consciousness of the recipient and focus it on immediate actions. Low-intensive technologies are designed for a longer period. Their goal is to create a favorable context for possible future actions!»<sup>1</sup>. Strategic communication, as a rule, is low-intensive and unhurried, as it is planned in advance by stable state institutions. At the same time, the world is too unstable to argue that strategic communication cannot be high-intense when it is needed.

Returning to the three stages of strategic communication that we highlighted above, we can say that they all have a common denominator, but nevertheless, each of them has its own specific features and differences: in content, in the intensity of the corresponding information activities, in a certain change in the structure of the goals.

So, for example, the first stage is characterized by the maximum intensity of information training. The main task is to form the desired public opinion. It is well known that it is much easier to form the initial desired opinion than, by losing time, trying to change it to the opposite when it has already been shaped by other social institutions or spontaneously by social media communication.

Knowing in advance the nature of the upcoming events (actions), the relevant information preparation must begin in advance for a successful information impact on the target audience. Starting it simultaneously with the beginning of real action will be a serious mistake, fraught with defeat in the information war, which often happens in the media. Paradoxically, the successful management of something in reality does not guarantee achievement of a leading position in the virtual information sphere which is, actually more powerful in its influence and unpredictable in its effects.

Given that, at the *first stage* of preliminary information preparation firstly requires high intensity and large amounts of funding, at the *second stage* of current information support, a rapid response to the quickly changing circumstances (the current situation) is of great importance. It is necessary to constantly update the information content in accordance with changes. Lightning response and the formation of positive public opinion on the event is of utmost importance here.

The *third stage* of strategic communication is unfolding after the completion of the phase of active actions, real events of a sporting, cultural, military, economic or political nature. The main task of this stage (subject to the successful implementation of the two previous ones) is the consolidation in the target audience public consciousness of the desired points of view related to the event that took place earlier.

In case of failure on strategic communication (mistakes during the first two stages), for the third stage, a different set of goals, tasks and planned activities will be required. One of the most important differences will be the emphasis not so much on advancing one's view of events as on the replacement/transformation of public opinion formed by a strategic adversary. Without replacing the dominant system of opinion, the promotion of another, alternative system of opinion, results impossible.

Pointing out the strategic and tactic media communication in Russia, which took place during the FIFA Confederations Cup this summer 2017, a wide range of technology of strategic communications was demonstrated: preliminary information preparation of fans, city guests, information support of events, coverage of events after the Cup — all this

<sup>1</sup> Gavra D. «Основы теории коммуникации», St. Petersburg, 2011, p. 15.

indicates a high level not only of actual events, but also professionally advanced communications managed by the competition organizers.

The FIFA Confederations Cup, which was held in four Russian cities (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Sochi and Kazan) between June the 8<sup>th</sup> and July the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, receiving positive reviews from both its direct participants (informal media), FIFA and most foreign media attending the event, who unanimously noted the high level in the tournament organization.

However, it would be reckless to mechanically transfer the moderate success on the FIFA Confederations Cup organization structures, which is considered to be the dress rehearsal of the FIFA World Cup 2018, this championship itself that will also be hosted in Russia. First of all, because the World Cup is a much bigger event. Nevertheless, we can consider it to be the first successful stage of massive information preparation that precedes the actual planned action, which is in our case FIFA World Cup 2018.

As Russian media «Kommersant» wrote at this time: «Preparations for the 2018 World Cup in terms of its perception by the public were almost similar to those that preceded the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Just like before the Games, the mass media euphoria that Russia got the right to host one of the largest sports forums on the planet was soon replaced by talk about the fact that, firstly, everything that can (and that cannot be stolen too) is stolen, Secondly, nothing will be built, and thirdly, shame for the whole world cannot be avoided. And in general, it's better to immediately sign your own insolvency and give the right to conduct the tournament to someone *worthier*»<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, the General Director of the organizing Committee on preparation and holding of the football World Cup «Russia 2018», A. Sorokin, noted that all ideas and innovations had been implemented at a very high level<sup>2</sup>.

We can argue that there were not negative evaluations about the event itself. Perhaps the only drawback was that some technical deficiencies indicated a lack of passage through security at the stadiums. But they were positively assessed by the guests. In order to summarize what has been written about this in social networks, we can point out the following quotation: «if strict security measures and a thorough search of everyone present at a football match is the price for our security, we are ready to pay the price»<sup>3</sup>. This became especially more important after a terrorist attack occurred in St. Petersburg metro in April 2017. In this sense, domestic and foreign media do not contradict each other and showed rare unanimity about the Confederation Cup organization.

However, not every issue was of such easy media treatment and arose some conflict in public communication. This is the case of the Zenit-arena stadium construction in St Petersburg. The conflict broke out because of the cost of the stadium, which amounted to more than 50 billion rubles (which is 706 million euro or 1,1 billion dollars). The Zenit-arena itself and the Vice-Governor charged with the stadium construction became the object of constant criticism in the media, not only at domestic level but also echoing international media<sup>4</sup>.

Informal communication in social media saved the day: Zenit-arena began to receive praising reviews, the public opinion was formed due to uncontrolled social communication, and the Vice-Governor Igor Albin on his page on Facebook reposted numerous

<sup>1</sup> «Коммерсант» 12.07.2017.

<sup>2</sup> «Ведомости» 05.07.2017.

<sup>3</sup> Conclusion based on our quantitative content-analysis of mass and social media during the Confederation Cup.

<sup>4</sup> *El País*, 20/06/2016. Mostovoi, former Russian international player who belong to several Spanish League football team was openly talking about this in this interview published by *El País*.

positive feedbacks from football fans and guests of the Cup, proving to his opponents the error of their judgment by the live examples. Thus, the scales were outweighed in favor of the authorities and the rave reviews turned out to be the majority<sup>1</sup>. Anyway, we acknowledge that these opinions belong only to those who decided to share them in that Facebook profile.

Being absolutely unpredictable and uncontrollable, in the case of «Zenit Arena», social media helped the Vice-Governor of the main city hosting the Confederations Cup to win in a prolonged crisis communication and to solve a long dispute about the appropriateness of the investment<sup>2</sup>.

In the same breath it should be noted, however, that communication in social networks is very risky. Though they just bark but not bite, social networks spontaneously and uncontrollably form alternative public opinion faster than official media. Therefore, the strategic communications rely on them, they save when no other methods were able to help.

There was an official strategic and current communications plan to be applied by the authorities, but the reality was also corresponding to the worshipping revues. Even the social international media did not contradict the official opinion in the sense of a negative view.

The true stories, which become anecdotes of the Confederations Cup, were widely spread in mass and social media. Such stories as that one about the fan of the Mexican national team Vicente Ochoa, who came to the Confederations Cup to support his national team, and spoke about his swift attitude change about Russia after the tournament. His words on Tuesday, July 2, leads «Championships.com»: «Friends were convinced that in Russia it is dangerous, cold. Moreover, it's gloomy people will never understand my fun. Even so, it will also be extreme, but a good adventure, I decided»<sup>3</sup> — Ochoa recalled. He had heard a lot of negative stories about Russia and Russians, but changed his mind after arriving at the Confederations Cup: «I was amazed. They helped us, sang and danced with us, we both ached and drank, and now I send messages to doubting friends with one text: "You must be in Russia at the 2018 World Cup". I want to say that I fell in love with Russia and will definitely return here in a year»<sup>4</sup>.

The story about Arturo Garcia from Monterrey also became world famous, who was so keen to support the Mexican national team that he made an incredible decision. He told his wife that he would go to the store for cigarettes, and he went to the airport and flew to Russia to see the team's performance in the Confederations Cup live: «I told my wife that I would go to the supermarket for cigarettes, but I did not tell her which one»<sup>5</sup>, explained the football fan.

All these stories, though they were not strategically planned, definitely contributed to official strategic goals, to improve the image of Russia through informal channels. This is the case when life reality was worth the reality produced by media.

We can conclude that the image of Russia was not negatively affected by the organization of the Confederation Cup, though its positive impact in the international image of Russia was limited and reduced to anecdotic situations. This is what invites us to think about lessons learned on the eve of the 2018 World Cup and the need to initiate new research and evaluation on the matter.

When sport mega-events are organized, a large area of issues exists where the State can drill down by implementing policies of a deeper political character. Here

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/AlbinIgor>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <https://lenta.ru/news/2017/07/02/mexicanck> (04.01.2018).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <https://rg.ru/2017/06/29/meksikanec-vyshel-v-magazin-i-uletel-na-kubok-konfederacij-v-rossiiu.html> (04.01.2018).

we pointed out the importance of preserving a good international image and how to make it happen in the future and in many different activities. Traditionally this has been perceived as a political risk, but we argue that if we turn it upside down we meet a very important opportunity to improve the image of a country and its rulers. We must place the country in a SWOT<sup>1</sup> analysis in which threats may be transmuted to opportunities.

A sport mega-event of the scope of a football World Cup becomes an important component for global and local governance. Thus, intergovernmental networks involving global scope private actors (FIFA in this case, but also other actors such as the World Antidoping articulate Agencies WADA) with almost all levels of government in a country engaged in a common task to coordinate the organization of security, transport, logistics or development of a competition. And it engages the work of a large number of governmental actors at very different sectorial or territorial levels as well as many different civil servants and public workers.

Governance of the mega-event may result in the possibility of influencing the networks of political actors operating in a country or in a city projecting the image of this effort abroad at the international sphere. In consequence, the organizing committees end up acting as free spaces for political governance and government decision-making, influencing the foreign image of the whole country. Besides they can expand the positive effects far beyond the original purpose of the planned event. This is what makes it incredibly efficient use all these actions, a full plan of policy evaluation.

As some other global mega-events, the football World Cup may have a decisive impact on the image of the hosting country, yet its organization offers governments a *window of opportunity* to show to the world the brand of country or city. We can find several examples in the recent history of sport mega-events. In such a way, the refunded Spanish democratic system was introduced to the world in Barcelona in 1992, the emerging economic Chinese power was shown in 2008 Beijing Olympics and Brazil has tried to submit its candidature to lead Latin America with Rio 2016. In Russian's case, the World Cup offers a great opportunity to display the image that the government wants to project to the world. Given the characteristics of the event, the world mass media will be focusing on Russia for over a month, making it possible to promote many different aspects in the long term during this prime-time attention.

Finally, this opportunity can't be reduced to the sheer period of the event, but it may linger bringing very interesting profits to Russia. On one hand, these events are also pushing a very important wave that affects tourism and the touristic image of the country. It would be meaningless implementing touristic structures designed just to attend the need of the organizing towns during the few days of the event. On the contrary, all the work carried out in this area should help to improve the reception of tourists in the future and should aid to increase the level of income from tourism received by the organizing country.

On the other hand, it can become a public policy engine-propeller to promote a transformation beyond its temporal ending. This is especially significant in the urban areas close to the sport infrastructures where the main competitions were held and in the new accommodation services and touristic offer given by the organizing cities.

This is what we know as a mega-event legacy and it may be a sheer push for the development possibilities of a town. This may imply as well changes in border and visa controls policies, and it may produce some changes in police services performance. No doubt that all these issues would also be worthy to be studied in some complementary research.

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<sup>1</sup> Humphrey A. «SWOT Analysis for Management Consulting». SRI Alumni Newsletter. SRI International, December 2005.

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