

Timm Beichelt
Substitute Playing Fields
On the Relationship between Football and Power
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Sample Translation

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1. Introduction: Football as a Symbolic Space of Possibility

On the pages of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which exists in no fewer than 295 languages, the word ‘хозяин’ (‘chozyain’) can be found only in Russian.¹ It comes from Russian economic culture and designates a proprietor or administrator of means of production who is distinguished by a range of characteristics: pronounced power of judgment, pragmatism, care for subordinates and an ethical way of life. Originating in agrarian Russia in times of serfdom, the concept was reinterpreted in the first decades of the 20th century by pioneers of Eurasianism like Nikolai Trubetskoy and Petr N. Savitsky. They developed the ideal of ideocracy, in which “members of a ruling class are connected by a common worldview, a common mindset” (Trubetskoy 2005, p. 280). Savitsky coined the term chozjain-rule (хозяйнодержавие), with which the chozjain’s caring exercise of power also gained a political dimension (Savitsky 1925). Savitsky saw this as a system of rule with spiritual vocation, located beyond capitalist and socialist models. Communities structured according to an organic principle were clustered around the figure of a ruler who was to assure the community’s productivity beyond the mere pursuit of profit.

While the idea of chozjain-rule suffered during the Soviet era, a new version was revived by perestroika. After the terror of the Stalin years, stagnation under Brezhnev and the time of troubles under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, there was a substantial need for stability in Russia and the vicinity. In the post-Soviet states, except for the Baltics, this stability was found in autocratic regimes with putatively strong leaders. On Google, a search for ‘chozjain’ combined with ‘Putin’, ‘Lukashenko’ or ‘Kadyrov’ yields over 400,000 results when one enters the terms in Cyrillic script.

Concretely, the presidents of Russia, Belarus and Chechnya represent the dimension of care to only a limited degree; indeed, they rather stand for the ruthless exercise of power. Yet still today the ideal of an assertive man who enforces the primacy of community against free society with repressive methods, pooling political and economic resources and thereby balancing the claims to power of various elite groups, is cultivated in Russia and its close surroundings. The widespread image in the West of a corrupt and repressive power apparatus is not wrong, but

¹ Russian names and terms will be transliterated according to academic convention, with the exception of names and designations that have become established (for example, Abramovich, Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Kalashnikov, Lokomotiv, Sochi, Cheka, Chechnya).

it has to be supplemented with a conception of rule that touches on virtues such as individual vigour and community orientation. In turn, these values correspond with an idealised world as projected by Russian-Eurasian conservatism to this day.

Thus, for the purposes of image management, it is not surprising that Putin, Lukashenko and Kadyrov frequently present themselves as rulers who are interested and active in sports. Putin competes as a judoka and ice hockey player, Lukashenko also plays hockey, and Kadyrov takes to the field in a football tricot. Western coverage often makes fun of how Russian media report seriously on the athletic hobbies of their political leaders. Yet against the background of tension in the Russian cultural sphere between idealised and actual chozjain, this matter appears in a more nuanced light. In the field of sport it is possible to appeal to the honourable elements of chozjain-rule, which—also in the consciousness of Eastern-European journalists—stand in contrast to the ruthlessness and enrichment that so often shape politics in the post-Soviet region.

But why is it that authoritarian rulers align themselves with sport, and so often football? Is donning a sport tricot a way to curry favour with the public through alleged (or actual) athleticism? Is participation in ‘friendly matches’ with celebrities a ritual in which like-minded people and minions are subtly offered the opportunity for subordination? Are major sport events meant to secure internal and external power?

The motives of sport-oriented politicians will be discussed in the following pages, whereby there is far more to consider than post-Soviet territory alone. In the past two decades, not only in Russia and the vicinity but far beyond, a type of politician combining a latently authoritarian worldview, ethnically nativist impulses, and unprincipled pragmatism has gained in significance. Beyond observation of authoritarian regions, the question of the relationship between football and power arises precisely at the point where football politics and the particular interests of football-political actors conflict with democratic norms.

At the same time, it can hardly be overlooked that organised sport and football in particular offer a convenient field for political practices that unfold outside of political-institutional channels. There is a conspicuous discrepancy between the social and economic significance of football and the indirect and weak access rights of the state

Yet football is by no means unpolitical. Sometimes it is credited with emancipatory potential. In the sense of a grass-roots movement, practices linked to football are said to be fit to drive back social discrimination and the economisation of the living environment (cf. Kuhn

2011). Some facts from the history of football even serve as evidence of social rebellion against authoritarian rulers. A recurring example is the quiet resistance of some—though by no means all—protagonists of Argentinian football against the military regime in the late 70s (Alabarces 2010). The sport is also credited with an important role in symbolic gender equality (Markovits/Rensmann 2010, chap. 4), and it can have conflict-reducing effects in divided societies (Sugden/Haasner 2010).

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6. International Football Politics: Fatal Proximity to Autocratic Regimes and Practices

In the previous chapters I focused mainly on German football, with the international arena coming into view only occasionally. Now I widen my perspective with systematic intentions. Firstly, chapters 2 and 5 indicated that recruitment of players and communities of football fans cannot be limited to national borders. Secondly, chapter 4 showed that the European and global levels of football (UEFA and FIFA) represent an important part of the national value chain.

Not only for individual clubs and associations but also for commercial football as a whole, delimitation of business corresponds to the fundamental principle of (football) capitalism, expanding into bigger and bigger markets in order to broaden the economic base. Thirdly, in chapter 3 I sketched a close intertwinement of football-political structures with the world of international associations and international business. Thus, the international dimension of football is relevant on social, economic and political levels.

As in previous chapters, I concentrate here on areas that I find to lack sufficiently systematic analysis. This is not the case when it comes to the social globalisation of the sport. With *Globalization and Football*, Richard Guilianotti and Roland Robertson (2009) presented a standard reference on the subject. A few years ago, Andrei Markovits and Lars Rensmann also wrote an extensive work on the identity patterns, group formations and social dynamics of global sport, including football (Markovits/Rensmann 2010). Additionally notable is the volume *Global Players*, edited by Michael Fanizadeh and others (Fanizadeh et al. 2005). With such comprehensive studies on social and economic globalisation in connection with football already available, I concentrate on the political level. In keeping with the approach developed in chapter

2, and the field-theoretical approach of Pierre Bourdieu, politics is not treated separately from economics and society but rather viewed as an integrated power-political field.

In this chapter I deal with FIFA, and in the following chapter I focus on Russia. On the one hand, this is due to current football-political events, given the Football World Cup taking place in Russia in 2018. On the other hand, the Russian case prototypically represents a certain model of (discursive, material and normative) policy making that has been on the rise in recent years, not only in Russia. It is marked by the symbiosis of political and economic power, informal procedures and loyalty as a central resource of rule.

This model gains brisance when contrasted with democracy, in which—at least ideally—political actors dominate the economy and there also exist largely formalised and thus transparent rules of procedure. In democracies, those who are governed choose the ones that govern them, with the possibility of recalling the governing by elections as well as possibilities of political participation (Dahl 1989).

It is not only international football that is far removed from a democratic form of government. My thesis, advanced from the previous chapters, is that power structures in football are far more similar to a late-capitalist autocracy than many observers are aware or would like to think. However, by no means do I want to suggest that most leading figures in German football are autocrats: certainly not. Yet in recent decades they have committed themselves more and more strongly to practices that weaken the mechanisms of accountability, replacing social involvement with the economic business interests of a few actors. Not only international but also national football is developing in a direction in which democratic practices are gradually eroded, within the field of football and, through its character as a mass phenomenon, also beyond.

Recently, the consequences of this link between autocratic conceptions of rule and football-political action can be seen nowhere better than in FIFA, whose awarding practice for the Football World Cups from 2006 to 2022 is under general suspicion of corruption, to a large extent sufficiently proven. As the most important international football association and organiser of one of the world's biggest sport events with the most media attention, FIFA decisively shapes international football politics; it becomes the object of political interference for precisely this reason. I aim to show how practices that are far from democratic, and a process of accounting for corruption allegations that is hardly seriously conducted, may produce transformative effects that go beyond mere damage to image.

The FIFA Regime

Let us put ourselves for a moment in the position of Sepp Blatter, former president of the world football association FIFA. In Germany, the image that is sketched of him corresponds to that of the mafia godfather (Kistner 2012). But is this characterisation accurate? Blatter actually combines a range of properties that make him stand out in a positive light from the often murky brew of football functionaries. He is one of the few figures in world football who does not draw his legitimation from a past as star player, returns from the commodity trade or protection by the dynasty of one or the other kleptocratic state.

As a young adult, Blatter was denied a career as a professional football player because his father preferred to see him in economics at the University of Lausanne than at FC Lausanne-Sport. His professional path led him from the Valais tourist association to the Swiss Ice Hockey Federation to the Swiss watchmaker Longines, where he was director of public relations from 1968 to 1975 (biographical information from Affentranger 2007).

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