Tears in the patchwork: The Sochi Olympics and the display of a multiethnic nation

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Tears in the Patchwork: The Sochi Olympics and the Display of a Multiethnic Nation

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Abstract This article examines what image of Russia is being projected in official rhetoric about the Sochi Olympics. It is argued that the imagined community being displayed is a diverse, inclusive and tolerant nation, even an international example of ethnic conviviality. The article puts this narrative in historical perspective, relating it to the mnogonatsionalnost policies of tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. This imagination, though explicitly very inclusive, rests on important exclusions and silences. By selective exhibitions of minority groups the other is domesticated, stereotyped and reduced to kitsch and folklore, glossing over conflict-ridden histories and prevailing inequalities.

Introduction

A mediated mega-event like the Olympics is about much more than sports. It is also about imagining communities and about creating attachment to such collective selves. The intended audience of this “project of belonging” is not only the outside world, but as much or even more, the domestic public, those who are interpellated or solicited to be part of this community. During recent years, Olympic Games have increasingly been used by host nations to manifest their own ethnic diversity and multicultural identity. This was the case during the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, whose opening ceremony featured members of First Nations tribes performing traditional dances, as well as the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, projecting the image of a hip, multi-coloured Britain shaped by a history of international migration. The 2014 Olympics in Russian Sochi continues this trend.

In the Olympic context, the multiculturalist theme feeds on an older narrative of internationalism and peaceful coexistence, which was one of the ideological foundations when the modern Olympic movement was formed in the late 1800s. However, the displays of multiculturalism which have become a natural part of contemporary Olympic Games are not unproblematic as they tend to rely on essentialist and stereotypical exhibitions of minority cultures to manifest the “cultural richness” of the host nation. In addition, in their idyllic depiction of harmonious conviviality these displays tend to glorify the “tolerance” of host states and deny legacies of colonialism and racism, as well as ongoing discrimination of minorities (cf. Heinz Housel, 2007; Hogan, 2003).

The aim of this article is to examine how Russia is imagined in the official narrative of the Sochi Olympics, more specifically how the symbolic boundaries for inclusion into this community are being imagined. The focus lies on discourses of multiculturalism, multinationalism and ethnic coexistence. To reconstruct an official narrative I analyse national media coverage, advertisements, commodities and museum exhibitions. Much of this material was collected during fieldwork in Sochi in May 2013.

After a theoretical discussion about media-events’ role in creating belonging to political communities, a very short historical overview is given about nationality policies and discourses of multinationalism in tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Taking departure in these discussions, the following section analyses Sochi-2014 as a project of belonging which aims to construct and spread a certain image of Russia to its citizens and to the
world. The main argument of the article is that the Sochi Olympics are used to promote an image of Russia as an example of successful multiculturalism and ethnic conviviality, an image which however rests on important exclusions and silences, glossing over conflict-ridden histories and current injustices.

**Media events and belonging**

The notion *politics of belonging* is used by several authors (Anthias, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011) to frame studies of identity, boundaries and social categorization in a globalized world. It emphasizes the political in boundary-making, that the construction of communities is an inherently conflict-ridden process intimately related to the distribution of power in society. According to Nira Yuval-Davis:

"(t)he politics of belonging involves not only constructions of boundaries but also inclusion or exclusion of particular people, social categories and groupings within these boundaries by those who have the power to do this" (2011:18).

The focus on belonging does not a priori tie the construction of political collectives to one specific bond or marker. Although nationality remains the major organizing principle of political communities in our days, we should not presuppose that this must always be the case, but allow for analytical openness as to which dimension of belonging – perhaps nationality, gender or religion - we should include in a particular study without beforehand defining which principle is the overarching one. Belonging involves, writes Floya Anthias, an affective dimension which has to do both with self-identification and others’ recognition: “to belong is to be accepted as part of a community, to feel safe within it and to have a stake in the future of such a community of membership” (2006:21).

The media – widely conceived – play a crucial role in the politics of belonging as it provides the space where communities are imagined and where we are exposed to otherness (Anderson, 1983; Silverstone, 2007). The creation of imagined communities is, according to Stuart Hall, facilitated by “the spectacle of the other”, by which he means the representation of other races, cultures or social groups as stereotypes, reducing them to a few simple characteristics represented as natural, thereby essentializing and freezing them as different (Hall, 1997:257f). Never is the media’s importance for belonging and boundary-making more accentuated than during so called *media events*, described by Dayan and Katz as “high holidays of mass communication”, monopolizing and centering media attention on one activity or occasion represented as “historic”, and appealing to mass audiences (Dayan & Katz, 1992:1ff). Media events such as the Eurovision, Lady Di’s funeral or in my case the Olympics can be vital forces of social integration, reasserting the legitimacy and desirability of particular modes of belonging to certain spatial imaginaries (Orgad, 2012:156). This does not mean that media events are always successful in establishing a sense of belonging, as audiences are diversified and sometimes appropriate the intended messages sceptically, ironically or in even more unexpected ways (Hepp & Couldry, 2010:12). How audiences interpret and receive the narratives of media events lies however outside the scope of this paper. The focus is on the integrative *claims* of the Sochi Olympics, how it is crafted as a project of belonging, imagining and displaying a certain version of Russia. Such an imagination, totalizing and idealizing, rests on important exclusions and silences. As Anthias writes:
... the collective places constructed by imaginations of belonging gloss over the fissures, the losses, the absences and the borders within them. The notion of ‘imagining’ also refers to the ways in which constructions of belonging serve to naturalize socially produced, situational and contextual relations, converting them to taken-for-granted, absolute and fixed structures of social and personal life. Such constructions produce a ‘natural’ community of people and function as exclusionary borders of otherness (Anthias 2006:21).

The ambivalence of Russian multinationalism

The idea of a community which harbours a multitude of cultures, languages and religions has a long history in Russia. It was a cornerstone in tsarist imperialism, not least was it a political necessity in order to get support from regional elites. In the 19th century, ethnographers explored and catalogued with great fascination habits and idioms in the vast empire. The celebration of cultural diversity existed in tension, however, with Russification policies aiming to create and strengthen Russian cultural hegemony. After 1917, the Bolsheviks intended to end Great Russian chauvinism and organized the new socialist state as a federation on ethnic principles. Every territorial body should “belong” to a titular nation, and the communists actively nurtured nation-building according to the motto “nationalist in form, socialist in content” (Slezkine, 1994). The SSSR has sometimes been called a country where multiculturalism prevailed (Malakhov, 2000). The ethnographic inventory was intensified, and where nationalist sentiment was found lacking, it was invented (Slezkine, 1994). Despite the anti-tsarist rhetoric, however, the Soviet state (especially from Stalin onwards) in many ways continued the imperialist Russian project, as ethnic Russians where given a special place in the “friendship of nations” that made up the SSSR, as symbolic big brothers or the first among equals (Karlsson, 1995).

Multinationalism (mnogonatsionalnost’) remains the official ideology in post-Soviet Russia. The civic-statist rossiiskii identity (as opposed to the more exclusive ethnocultural russkii) is supposed to encompass all ethnicities living in the federation. Tolerance is put forward as an ideal, but there is a scepticism against the Western concept of multiculturalism, which is often dismissed as “political correctness” with dangerous divisive consequences for society (Malakhov, 2002). Putin’s much-cited article on the national question, published before the 2012 election, takes departure in the alleged failure of Western multiculturalism, and points to a specific Russian experience dating back to tsarist times. Arguing fervently against ethno-nationalist calls to create a “Russia for the Russians”, Putin writes that Russia is and must remain a multinational state, but that the ethnic Russians have a special role as a lead culture, holding together this unique civilization (Putin, 2012). When addressing foreign audiences (in diplomacy or commerce) official Russia stresses even more the multinational character of the country, aware that the idea of an ethnically diverse and multi-confessional Russia is more appealing to the world than a monocultural Orthodox-Slavic nation (Malakhov, 2012).

As we have seen, mnogonatsionalnost’ has historically been tied to the Russian imperial project. Although emphasis has shifted, the idea that ethnic Russians are a lead culture with a special mission to hold together a multinational family has been official ideology for 150 years. Like many forms of Western multi-
culturalism, this ideology holds a primordialist view on ethnicities as naturally given ontological facts, and also presumes that ethnicity is the prime identity for individuals. Mnogonatsionalnost’ is also often reductionist, restricting its celebration of diversity to superficial characteristics like folklore (Malakhov, 2012). Putin’s words about ethnic Russians as a lead culture indicate that Russian multinationalism is highly susceptible to a critique which some postcolonial scholars have directed against Western multiculturalism: that it is an ideology hiding ethnocentric values behind universalist claims, ready to “tolerate” diversity only as long as it can be accommodated within the norm and does not disrupt the master narratives of society (Bhabha, 1990:208).

Celebrating diversity with Sochi-2014

Russia will show the visitors of the Games the best of Russian (rossiiskoi) culture

The above slogan, in Russian, written over a map of Russia with an artistically designed patchwork pattern, was part of an advertisement campaign distributed on television, Internet, as well as on huge outdoor TV screens in Sochi during my fieldwork in the city in May 2013. The one theme in the official narrative about Sochi-2014 which is being disseminated most consistently – in the rhetoric of politicians and Olympic officials, in advertisements and slogans, in the merchandise products designed for the Games – is that Russia is a culturally diverse, tolerant and open country. In the section “brand” on the official webpage of Sochi-2014, we can read that the Games will promote an image of Russia as a “country that is committed to equality and celebrates diversity” (sochi2014.ru a). President Vladimir Putin, who since the start has invested much personal prestige in the Olympic project, expressed a similar idea in a speech in June 2013:

We are determined to organize a real celebration in 2014, a festival of sport, deserving of its unique mission: to unite people around the world with really significant values - a healthy lifestyle, tolerance and equality (sochi2014.ru b).

A recurring metaphor for ethno-cultural diversity in Sochi rhetoric is the “patchwork”. The head of the organizing committee, Dmitrii Chernyshenko, has said that the cultural program of Sochi-2014 is devoted to

...preserve and multiply the unique cultural richness of Russia, and to involve all residents in a grand celebration (…), show the world the “patchwork” (loskutnoye odeyalo) of cultural traditions in our country (sochi2014.ru c).
The image-language used in connection to Sochi-2014 tells the same story. Advertisements, flags and posters, as well as official merchandise in the form of clothes, keyrings, stamps, bags etc make use of the patchwork pattern (see images 1-2), a practice which can be described as a commodification of cultural diversity.

In a similar vein, the Olympic torch is used to imagine a multinational community of belonging. During 2013 Russian state television and popular newspapers such as Komsomolskaya Pravda focused extensively on the selection process of torch-carriers from each of the 83 territorial units in Russia. We can expect that during the months preceding the Games, media images of the Olympic torch being carried by people of different skin colours through every part Russia, from the Arctic ice to the bottom of Lake Baikal to the top of Mount Elbrus, and even into space, will manifest a Russianness spanning cultures, races and religions.

It could be argued that the framing of Sochi-2014 as a celebration of Russian diversity and tolerance is merely make-up intended for a foreign audience, an artificial import of Olympic clichés which has little to do with Russian political realities. In my view, that claim would be too simplifying. It is certainly true that since the late 1990s multiculturalism – in a depoliticized and commercialized version – has become an integral aspect of Olympism, and that displays of ethno-cultural diversity are now an obligatory part of opening ceremonies at every Olympics (Giardina, Metz, & Bunds, 2012). The rich use of Olympic catchwords and citations of Pierre de Coubertin by the Russian hosts are part of the Olympic package and in this respect no different from, say, the rhetoric of Sydney 2000 or Vancouver 2010. However, this narrative chimes in harmony with the Russian mnogonatsionalnost’ ideology, which has been official policy since tsarist times, and which is a central tenet for the current administration. Even if the word “multiculturalism” is seldom used in positive terms by Russian politicians, the idea of celebrating tolerance, ethno-cultural diversity and conviviality will not sound strange to a Russian audience but is already an important part of official ideology. The rhetoric developed around Sochi-2014 is an interesting example of how global and domestic narratives can reinforce each other. We will see below that the ambiguity and ambivalence characterizing Russia’s multinationalism, to celebrate diver-
Tolerance and inclusion are put forward as ideals not only when dealing with ethnocultural differences, but also when it comes to improving the situation for people with disabilities. The Games will, it is often held, lead to a more accessible society with fewer physical barriers, not only regionally but nationally (sochi2014.ru d). Nonetheless, there are strict limits regarding who is included in the openness promoted by Sochi-2014. Ironically, this project of tolerance is being launched at the same time as there is a nation-wide campaign – led by the power-holding United Russia party – to ban “homosexual propaganda”, which was also the pretext used for prohibiting an LGBT organization to set up a Pride house during the Olympics (Persson, forthcoming). The inclusionist rhetoric of Sochi-2014 falls silent when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity. Thus, when scrutinized, the universalist construction of belonging put forward in official narratives about the Sochi Olympics is more exclusive than it appears at first glance.

**Druzhba narodov once again**

The modern Olympic Games were conceived by visionaries who set new standards and found new ways for development. They believed that sport engenders trust and cooperation between cultures and nations. Sochi 2014 is striving to make Russia’s first Winter Games an embodiment of peaceful, productive dialogue between peoples (sochi2014.ru a).

A strong leitmotif in the official narrative about Sochi-2014 is that the Games will promote understanding between peoples and nations. This idea feeds on the internationalism underpinning Olympism. The founder of the modern Games, Pierre de Coubertin, hoped that the Olympics would bring together all nations of the world and contribute to peace and reconciliation (Coubertin, 2000). The Olympic rings, which represent the five continents, symbolize this peaceful internationalism (Gutman, 2002).

Interestingly however, this internationalist theme also resembles the Soviet rhetoric of “friendship of peoples” (druzhba narodov). During the Cold war, this phrase was used as guiding principle both for the ethno-federal design of the SSSR and for the relations between the states within the socialist world. As ethnic Russians had a dominant political, military and cultural role within the Eastern bloc, it is quite easy to claim that the druzhba narodov rhetoric served imperialist aims, wrapping Russian interests and values in a more appealing package by presenting them as universalistic and altruistic. On many occasions, this narrative was used to legitimize interventionist and colonial policies (cf. Petersson & Persson, 2011), e.g. during the invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. That the language of internationalism can still be used to legitimize expansionist policies is evident in an interesting statement by Sergey Markov, a member of the State Duma for the Putinist party United Russia, at a meeting on Abkhazia’s role in the Sochi Olympics:

The Olympic movement is a peace movement, an international movement. All nations have to be involved in it, including the Abkhaz people. It cannot be isolated from the Olympic Games, for the latter are going to be held a few kilometres away from Abkhazian territory. So the very principle of the Olympic movement demands that the Abkhazian economy and residents of Abkhazia be integrated in the process (cited in Rytövuori-Apunen, 2013).
The internationalism inherent in Olympic ideology is state-centred, conservative and anti-radical. It fits very well into the rhetoric of dominant actors, naturalizing and depoliticizing the status quo and power claims of nation-states. At the same time, all kinds of counter-hegemonic actions, questioning some aspect or policy of the host-state, are labelled as “political” and thereby banned from the Olympics.

When talking about the role of the 2014 Games in promoting dialogue and reconciliation between peoples, the specific qualities of the geographic location are often mentioned. As many other places in the Caucasus, the Sochi region is home to a multitude of ethnic groups such as Armenians, Circassians and Estonians. The background is very complex, but wars, deportations and split-and-divide politics are part of the picture (cf. Coene, 2010). In official rhetoric, the multi-ethnic character of Sochi is put forward as making it especially suitable for the Olympics. At a forum devoted to sports and peace, the head of the local administration in Sochi, Anatolii Pakhomov, claimed that: “Sochi is an ideal location for this forum, because it is the home of more than a hundred different European, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures” (sochi2014.ru e). An article in Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote about a monument being built in Sochi, consisting of soil from all 83 regions in Russia (Gorelov, 2013), a story which played into the imagination of “Sochi as a Russian microcosm”.

The portrayal of Sochi, situated at the foot of the Caucasus mountains, as an epitome of successful multiculturalism bears the potential of a symbolic re-loading of the term “Caucasus” (Kavkaz), a word which since the 1990s in Russia and elsewhere has gained the connotations of separatism, inter-ethnic strife and terrorism. The diverse Caucasus could have been presented to the world as a place of long-time peaceful conviviality and cultural interchange, not just conflict. However, in the narrative of Sochi-2014 Sochi is not presented as part of the Caucasus but of Russia. In fact, the word “Caucasus” is never used in the material I have studied. Thus, we should not expect the Sochi Olympics to contribute to such a symbolic re-inscription.

**The spectacle of the other**

![Image 3. The exhibition “Traditional culture of the Circassians”](image)

An important aspect of the imagination of a diverse and tolerant Russia is the display of ethnic minorities and local cultures. According to Stuart Hall, we are fascinated by otherness, because the exhibition of other people as different from ourselves serves to fix boundaries and is necessary for the imagination of community (Hall, 1997:257f). One function of such displays is to delineate normality. By naming and pointing out certain groups, though nominally including them in the “us”,

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their otherness is reinscribed and marked, and the ethno-cultural norm reinforced.

In May 2013, I visited an exhibition at the Sochi Museum of Arts, entitled “Traditional culture of the Circassians” (see images 3-4). The exhibition was presented as part of the cultural program of the Sochi Olympics. The Circassians (in Russian variously termed adygeitsy, kabardiny, cherkessy) are a Caucasian ethnic group which ruled the Sochi area until the bloody end of the “Caucasian war” in 1864, and have since then been to a large extent scattered in diaspora. Due to the 150th anniversary of what many Circassians call a genocide, and the fact that Krasnaya Polyana, where the skiing competitions will take place during the Olympics, was the place where tsarist forces celebrated the defeat of independent Circassia, this “skeleton in Russia’s closet” (Dzutsev, 2011) has been revived by the Olympics. Sochi-2014 has mobilized Circassians abroad and in Russia to call for genocide recognition, and in some cases for an international boycott (Hansen, 2013). Simultaneously, the uprisings in Libya and Syria, two countries with large Circassian minorities, have led to a debate about whether Circassians whose ancestors were deported in the 19th century should have the right to return to Russia.

These sensitive issues were not the topic of the exhibition. Instead the museum focused on traditional costumes, weapons, handicraft, musical instruments and jewellery. In classical orientalist style, the Circassians were pictured as a noble but uncivilized tribal people, consisting of belligerent proud men and exotically charming veiled women1. The history of the Circassians in the Sochi region was traced back thousands of years, and maps showed the extension of Circassia in the 19th century. There was no mention of colonial wars, deportations, refugees or current Circassian claims for recognition.

The museum exhibition is a good example of how, by selective narrations, the other is domesticated and reduced to kitsch and folklore, and how conflict-ridden histories and prevailing inequalities are glossed over. At the

1 Such representations of a symbolic “East” (a role played alternately by The Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East), have a long tradition in Russian cultural history, spanning from Pushkin’s and Tolstoy’s romantic tales of mountain savages, to Soviet cinema and contemporary works of popular culture (cf. Layton 1995; Michaels 2004).
same time a norm is reinforced: by picturing the “ethnic” other as uncivilised and stuck in tradition, the Russian self emerges as civilized and progressive (cf. Oye, 2010). At the time of writing, the Olympic opening ceremony in 2014 still lies ahead, but my guess is that we can expect similar displays of “ethnic diversity”, celebrating the otherness of minority cultures, but in a superficial, stereotyping and depoliticizing way, stripping them of any difference or history which cannot be accommodated within the master narrative.

**Concluding remarks**

This article has examined a particular media event – the Sochi Olympics – as a project of belonging, imagining and displaying a Russia which is diverse, tolerant and inclusive, whose history of ethnic conviviality makes it an example of successful multiculturalism. The narrative makes use of Olympic clichés of the kind obligatory at every Olympic Games nowadays, but is also firmly rooted in the official ideology of mnogonatsionalnost’, which has been a legitimizing principle for the Russian state since tsarist times. Despite a universalist language, ethnic Russians are awarded a normative status in this multinational community, e.g. through displays of the otherness of minority peoples. This practice fits well into the ideological stance of the current Russian administration that ethnic Russians are a lead culture holding together a unique civilization. Recalling what Floya Anthias writes about how imaginations of belonging gloss over fissures, losses, absences and borders within them (2006:21) the official discourse of Sochi-2014 operates according to this logic of depoliticization. Political and social contingencies are subsumed into an image of completion, harmony and taken-for-grantedness. The Russia which is imagined and displayed – inclusive, tolerant, multicultural and peace-striving – is just there, emptied from contradiction and conflict. A closer examination, however, reveals silences and exclusions in the dominant narrative, things that do not fit in and therefore can expose the limits and incoherencies of Russia’s Olympic dream.

**References**


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