Russia on display. Sochi-2014 as a project of belonging in contemporary media

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RUSSIA ON DISPLAY: SOCHI-2014 AS A PROJECT OF BELONGING IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Mediated mega-events are essentially projects of belonging: about imagining communities and about creating attachment to such collective selves. However, events like the Olympic Games are not only an opportunity for states to reinforce official constructions of belonging but can also be sites for the articulation and dissemination of contesting identity narratives. This article investigates Russian media narratives around the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, mainstream as well as alternative. It is argued that the Russian regime uses the Olympics to create national and global visibility for a specific project of belonging: that of a re-emerging great power — strong and united — but also an inclusive and tolerant place which can serve as an international example of ethnic and religious conviviality. This imagined community, however, rests on exclusions and silences. In addition, three alternative projects of belonging, emerging from the Circassian diaspora, LGBT rights activists and Islamists, are examined. Although these are very different, they all attempt to use the spotlight of the Sochi Olympics to disrupt the mainstream narrative and create visibility for challenging imaginations of community. On the more general level the article argues that the media contestations around the Sochi Olympics provide an insight into how the quest for visibility has become a central dynamic in the Russian media environment.

Keywords: *Olympic games, Sochi, media, belonging, visibility.*

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РОССИЯ НА ЭКРАНЕ: ОЛИМПИАДА В СОЧИ И ВЛАСТЬ ЗАМЕТНОСТИ В СОВРЕМЕННЫХ МЕДИА

Мегасобытия, транслируемые через средства массовой информации, представляют собой проекты принадлежности, имеющие непосредственное отношение к воображаемым сообществам и созданию связей с коллективной идентичностью. В то же время такие события, как Олимпийские игры, не только предоставляют возможность государствам воспроизводить официальные конструкты принадлежности, но также могут выступать способом выражения и распространения конкурирующих идентичностей. В данной статье исследуются официальные и альтернативные нарративы российских медиа, посвященные зим-

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ним Олимпийским играм в Сочи в 2014 г. Утверждается, что российский политический режим использует Олимпиаду для обеспечения национальной и глобальной заметности в рамках особого проекта принадлежности, который, с одной стороны, представляет возвращение на мировую арену великой державы в виде объединенной и сильной России, а с другой, демонстрирует Россию толерантной, направленной на социальное включение средой, выступающей на международном уровне примером этнического и религиозного добрососедства. Тем не менее, автор полагает, что данное воображаемое сообщество основывается на исключениях и недомолвках. В статье также анализируются три альтернативных проекта принадлежности, которые формируются черкесской диаспорой, активистами движения за права ЛГБТ и исламистами. Несмотря на их существенные различия, все эти проекты стремятся использовать внимание, направленное на Олимпийские игры в Сочи, для подрыва официального нарратива и обеспечения заметности конкурирующим идентичностям. В целом, в статье отмечается, что противостояния, формирующиеся в медиа вокруг Олимпиады в Сочи, способствуют пониманию процесса формирования заметности как центральной тенденции российской медиа-среды.*

Ключевые слова: Олимпийские игры, Сочи, медиа, принадлежность, заметность.

Introduction
Russia will show the visitors of the Games the best of Russian culture

The above slogan, in Russian, projected onto a map of Russia with an artistically designed patchwork pattern, was part of an advertisement campaign which could be seen on television and the Internet, and also on huge outdoor TV screens during one of my visits to Sochi during May 2013. The avowal that the Sochi Olympics 2014 will be an opportunity to display to the world what Russia and the Russians are remind us that mediated mega-events such as the Olympics or the Eurovision song contest are about much more than sports or music. They are also about imagining communities, negotiating what "we" are and what "we" are not, and about creating attachment to such collective selves. The intended audience 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 "project of belonging".

Olympic Games are essentially media events (Dayan & Katz 1992; Couldry et al.*,* 2010). For the overwhelming majority of the world, the images and narratives in the media constitute the *only* reality of the Olympic Games: this event is constituted by its appearance on the world's screens. Therefore it is interesting to note that within media studies it is widely acknowledged that due to recent transformations of the media environment — digitalization, globalization and fragmentation — it has become more difficult for any one actor to control the circulation of narratives and images in the media (2012: 85). Thus, media-events like the Olympic Games are not only an opportunity for states to reinforce official constructions of belonging but increasingly

also sites for the articulation and dissemination of alternative identity narratives (Ibid:156; Dayan & Katz 1992: 72 2010).

The Olympic history knows many examples of how host states have used the Olympic spotlight to display a desired image of the nation: great power status, cultural richness or technological advancement (Guttman, 1994). The 2008 Games in Beijing, for example, projected the image of China as a new superpower, but simultaneously became a site for an intense negotiation of what was the "real China", where contesting mediated narratives clashed (Latham, 2009). The opening ceremony of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver stressed Canada s multicultural identity, displaying members of First Nations tribes performing traditional dances, but the event was also ciriticized by indigenous groups for being played out on "stolen land" (O Bonsawin 2010). The 2012 Summer Olympics in London fed upon nationalist imagery and well-known cultural clich s, but in addition tried to exhibit a hip, multicultural Britain shaped by a history of international migration (cf. Falcous & Silk 2010). It is hardly surprising that Russia continues the trend of using the Olympics to project a certain national image, but it is nonetheless worthwhile to investigate both the content of this image, and how it is contested. More generally, one can ask whether this case tells us anything more general about media and belonging in contemporary Russia.

The analysis is based on a close-reading of Russian mainstream newspaper and television news coverage of the Sochi Olympics. In addition to the national news media, I also look at museum exhibitions, commodities, advertisements and the official webpage of Sochi-2014. Some of this material was collected during fieldwork in Sochi in May 2013. I reconstruct a mainstream narrative, and identify a number of themes or tropes upon which this storyline is built. In addition, I examine some attempts, originating in the alternative media sphere, to contest and disturb this dominant narrative.

The main argument of the article is that the media contestations around the Sochi Olympics — between dominant and contesting narratives of belonging — provide an insight into how the quest for visibility has become a central dynamic in the Russian media environment. While much research on the media in authoritarian states focuses on repressive measures of media control (censorship, crackdown on independent media outlets, harassments of journalists), insufficient attention has been given to "softer", strategies, whereby regimes attempt to amplify their own visibility and spread desired narratives and images as much as possible. By showing how a media spectacle like the Sochi Olympics is used in this productive, attention-maximizing way, the article aims to contribute to contemporary research on media in authoritarian states in general, and media in Russia in particular.

Belonging, media and visibility
Media and the politics of belonging

Many researchers stress the role of the media — widely conceived — for identity and boundary-making (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995). As the construction of collective identities rests on imagination, narration and representation, they argue, the media provide the most important space where communities can be imagined and symbolic boundaries drawn. Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) uses the term "politics of belonging" to

conceptualize identity negotiations and boundary-making practices in the contemporary world. She argues that by political projects of belonging, various actors attempt to construct attachments to particular collectives, which are themselves constructed in these projects. Importantly, not only hegemonic powers are engaged in the politics of belonging. The notion also involves how dominant stories of who is and who is not part of the political community are contested and resisted by other political actors (Ibid: 20).

So how can we understand the role of the media for the politics of belonging? Roger Silverstone (2007) argues that we should treat the media as an environment, as they are increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life and make up an important part of our lifeworld. Inspired by Hanna Arendt, he believes the media function as a *space of appearance*, "both in the sense of where the world appears, and in the sense of appearance as such constituting that world (Ibid: 27). For the majority of the world, he argues, the 9/11 attacks against World Trade Center were constituted through their appearance on the screen, as most people did not experience the attacks physically. According to Silverstone, this is true for all politics; it is to some extent constituted by images and narratives in the media. In my view, Silverstone provides us with a fruitful theory of the media's role in constructing boundaries between self and other. Today, it is often through the media that we encounter the Other, and not seldom her or his appearance in the media is the only link that we will have. In Silverstone s words:

> the media provide the frameworks (or frameworlds) for the appearance of the other and define the moral space within which the other appears to us (Ibid:7).

Media visibility and power

As the media, on an everyday basis and with a wider reach and speed than ever, bring distant faces and voices into our homes and let us hear the stories of people we have never met and will never meet, the world — in all its heterogeneity and multitude — has become more visible than ever. Almost twenty years ago, John Thompson (1995) wrote that the media have created a "new visibility", new forms of publicness which mean that rulers are more visible and present in the everyday lives of ordinary people than before. This creates according to him new opportunities for them to expand their influence, both its degree of intrusiveness and its global reach. Though Thompson mostly had television in mind, I argue that in today s mediascape, when digital technology has made the media more pervasive and globalized than ever, this new visibility is to an even larger extent a defining feature of politics. Governments, businesses, interest groups, activists and terrorists are all dependent on the "oxygen of publicity".

To manage visibility has become a priority for political elites. In her more recent writings, Judith Butler (2004; 2010) has explored the relation between visibility and power. If media is a space of appearance, she argues, power is to be able to control appearance: to orchestrate what people hear and see, but also the way in which they hear and see it (2004:xviii-xx). This involves the regulation of content, i.e. which images and narratives can appear at all, but also the control of perspective: which interpretive frameworks are made available and which positions are offered to the reader (2010:65).

However, complete control of appearance is never fully achieved. Thompson argues that media visibility is a double-edged sword, creating not only possibilities but also risks for the powerful. The exercise of power, he writes is subjected to a new global scrutiny which makes it fragile (1995:140ff). According to Butler, the public sphere is built upon exclusions, there will always be something outside or beyond it, something which troubles our sense of reality and "does not conform to our established understanding of things" (Butler 2010:9). At certain moments, she argues, the boundaries of the public sphere break down, when something appears which does not fit into the masternarrative, which it cannot make sense of (2010:12). Due to the enormous speed and reproducibility of today's electronic media, when such disturbing images or stories appear they usually do not just disappear but start living their own life. As Silverstone puts it: "once the media have opened the door to the visibility of the world, we cannot pretend that it is not there" (Silverstone, 2007:26). At such instances, the limits of what can be seen, heard and said in the public sphere are disrupted and possibly redefined.

In my view, the concept of visibility is key to understanding the dynamics of politics of belonging today. Elite-driven projects of belonging are dependent on managing visibility, to manifest and spread their narratives as much as possible, as well as to restrict the appearance of those images and stories which might disturb their dominance. But also actors who challenge hegemonic constructions of belonging rest on visibility-enhancing strategies. If they are successful in creating visibility, they establish themselves in the space of appearance and cannot easily be forgotten or ignored.

The power of visibility in today s Russian media: a return of spectacle

Many media researchers have pointed out that, since Putin s ascension to power at the turn of the century, the Russian state has tightened its grip on the media with the result that most messages expressed on television and in major newspapers are now in line with the regime. Quite a large literature exists on the reappearance of censorship — in direct and indirect forms — in Putin's Russia (Koltsova, 2006; Zassoursky, 2004; Lipman 2010). There is also a quickly growing research field dealing with the Internet's role for freedom of expression and oppositional political mobilization in Russia (Knobel & Sanders, 2012; Lysenko & Desouza, 2010). In general, media research on authoritarian contexts tends to equalize the state with coercion and repression, and often overlooks how political elites in authoritarian states use media in more productive ways, attempting to amplify their own visibility and spread desired narratives and images as much as possible.

In my view, the Russian regime seems to be realising the altered dynamics of visibility in the contemporary media environment, that once the world is made visible, you cannot pretend it is not there. In a globalized, digitalized and fragmented media landscape, it is harder for any one actor to control the flow of content, or in Butler s terms, to orchestrate what people see and hear. Although censorship-like strategies no doubt are still exercised by the Russian regime, they are now often accompanied or replaced by softer means which do not rest on hiding or silencing, but instead on competing for attention in the media. If unflattering information cannot be hidden, positive stories are instead being spread as loud as possible and in as many sources as

possible. The aim is to drown potentially harmful material in a flood of narratives in line with the government's view. In line with this logic, the anti-Putin demonstrations during Winter 2011-12 were met by the regime not primarily with police brutality and mass arrests, but with the organization of equally big or bigger pro-Putin rallies, aiming to counterweigh the impression that the whole country was turning against the regime. Thus, we might be witnessing a "return of spectacle" in Russia, when not only demonstrations arranged by the authorities, but also orchestrated media events like the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest, the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 World Coup in football are used as megaphones for regime-friendly narratives. Unlike traditional censorship, this media strategy fits very well with the visibility logic of contemporary media.

Not only hegemonic actors strive for visibility, but also those who try to challenge dominant narratives. By spectacular and attention-seeking strategies adapted to the dynamics of contemporary media, alternative actors and narratives manage to penetrate the mainstream media and establish themselves in the public space of appearance. The Pussy riot-case is probably the best example of how the new visibility is transforming Russian media: by using the Christ the Saviour Cathedral and the Moscow court as a stage for their performances, an alternative group of artists managed to become central figures not only in the national but in the global media environment.

Sochi-2014 as a project of belonging
A great power's comeback

A central trope in mainstream media rhetoric about Sochi-2014 is that this mega-event will help unite the Russian people for a common cause and show the world that Russia has returned to the global arena as a strong player (Persson & Petersson 2013). The idea of restoring Russia s great power status, supposedly lost with the demise of the Soviet Union and the chaotic 1990s, has been one of few constant leitmotifs in the elusive ideology of the Putin administration, in which I also count the Medvedev interlude 2008-2012 (Bacon, 2012). The Sochi Olympics are being narrated as an episode in this resurrection drama. Medvedev has argued that the fact that Russia won the bid for organizing the 2014 Olympic Games "shows the power and strength of our country, our desire to win, our ability to create excellent conditions for hosting the Olympic Games..." (sochi2014.com, 2013c) and Putin has said that: (t)he Olympics will take place under the sign of re-establishing (*vosstanovleniya*) that, which was extinguished (sochi2014.com, 2013d).

Also the performance of Russian athletes during the Games is politicized, and connected to the power and greatness of Russia. Commenting about the poor performance of the Russian team during the Vancouver Olympics in 2010, Medvedev argued that sports failures were more deeply felt among Russians than other people, because "in our spiritual constitution (we) are a nation of winners" (kremlin.ru, 2010a). The almost war-like rhetoric used by Russian politicians when commenting upon sports result reminds us of how sports seems to fulfil a similar role in the imagination of community as war used to do (and still does), and has imported much of its symbolism and vocabulary (Billig 1995). Interestingly, the emphasis on physical strength, progress and effort which underpins the Olympic idea — epitomized by the motto "faster,

higher, stronger" — resonates well with the Russian national myth of the return of great power (Persson & Petersson 2013). The official narrative of the Sochi Olympics is a blend of global and national storylines, presenting Russian great power ambitions as coinciding with the Olympic cause. Thus, Olympism lends attraction and legitimacy to the story of a returning Russian great power.

A Russia for all

The self which is being displayed in this project of belonging is not only a strong and united Russia, but also an inclusive, tolerant and future-oriented society. In mainstream discourse about Sochi-2014, there is much stress on values such as "openness", "welcoming atmosphere" and "inclusion". This mega-event is pictured as an opportunity to display a new and future-oriented Russia, but also as an impetus in making Russia a more open country. According to the official webpage of the Sochi Olympics, one of the Olympic legacies will be "changed relations and heightened awareness regarding issues such as tolerance, inclusivity (e.g. for people with disabilities), social and ecological responsibility" (sochi2014.com, 2013a). Leaning on the universalist and humanist principles of Olympism, the Sochi Olympics are repeatedly connected to the promotion of human dignity in Russia. The ideas underpinning the Olympic movement are portrayed as guiding principles for how Russia should develop in the future: "As a result of the Sochi 2014 Games, an entire generation will be brought up with awareness and understanding of the Olympic and Paralympic values" (sochi2014.com, 2011b). One aspect of this inclusionist trope is about improving the situation for people with disabilities. The Games will, it is often held, lead to a more accessible society with less physical barriers, not only regionally but nationally (sochi2014.com, 2013b).

A friendship of peoples

In a similar vein, the official narrative of the Sochi Olympics stresses tolerance, cooperation and harmony among different national and ethnic groups, a trope that 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. The Olympic rings, which represent the five continents, symbolize this peaceful internationalism (Guttman 2002).

Thus, a recurring trope is that of ethnic and religious diversity and conviviality. 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' of cultural traditions in our country" (sochi2014.com, 2011c). At a forum devoted to sports and peace, the head of the local administration in Sochi, Anatolii Pakhomov, similarly 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.com, 2011a). The symbolic patchwork pattern is also used as a background on commercial products and information material such as flags, t-shirts, webpages etc. distributed for the Sochi Olympics. The cultural program of

Sochi-2014 focuses a lot on displaying ethnic traditions of the region, for example in an exhibition at the Sochi Art Museum, displaying what was called the "traditional culture of the Circassians", which I visited during May 2013. We can safely expect more such exhibitions of "cultural diversity", not least during the opening ceremony in 2014. In this rhetoric, Russia is put forward as a showcase of successful multiculturalism for the world.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that "the cultural richness" of the region is displayed in a highly exotifying, stereotypical and reductionist manner. For example, the above mentioned museum exhibition about the Circassians told a story delimited to ancient and recent handcraft, costumes, dances and weapons, but was silent regarding the darker sides of the historical relations between the Russian state and the Circassians, such as the killing and expulsion of millions of Circassians at the end of the "Caucasian war" in 1864, the current demands for genocide recognition or the plight of the Circassian diaspora in today s Syria. By such selective narrations the Other is domesticated and reduced to kitsch and folklore, glossing over conflict-ridden histories and prevailing inequalities. As Stuart Hall points out, "spectacles of the Other" naturalize and fix boundaries between normalcy and deviance and facilitate the imagination of communities (1997:258).

Floya Anthias writes that imaginations of belonging gloss over fissures, losses, absences and borders within them, presenting social and political specificities as natural and eternal facts (2006:21). The official discourse of Sochi-2014 operates according to such a logic of depoliticization. Historical 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. If we examine it closer we discover silences and exclusions in the dominant narrative of belonging. Interestingly, this message of tolerance and inclusion is being delivered simultaneously as there is a nation-wide campaign to ban "homosexual propaganda", which was also the pretext used for prohibiting an LGBT organization to set up a Pride house during the Olympics (gayrussia.eu, 2013). Thus, when scrutinized, the universalist and inclusivist construction of belonging put forward in official narratives about the Sochi Olympics, is more exclusive than they appear at a first glance.

Bringing home the Caucasus

In mainstream discourse, a connection is often made between the Sochi Olympics and development and modernization. The Games are framed as part of a bigger project, that of making North Caucasus into a stable, economically prosperous and tourist-friendly region. Putin has argued that "(t)he Sochi 2014 project is (...) about developing one of the most important regions in the Russian Federation" (sochi2014.com, 2013d).

However, the geographical location of the 2014 Olympics, at the foot of the Caucasian mountains nearby violence-torn republics such as Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria, and only kilometres from Georgian breakaway republic Abkhazia, is also connected to security risks in official rhetoric. An article in Komsomolskaya Pravda reported about the successful uncovering of a terrorist cell in Abkhazia which allegedly

planned to organize several terrorist attacks in Sochi. An interesting (and quite spectacular) link was made between Islamists, the Georgian government and undefined "terrorists from Turkey" (my interpretation is that the latter refers to Circassian diaspora groups):

> According to information in the field, Georgian intelligence services and representatives of terrorists from Turkey, linked to them, were involved in the delivery of weapons and explosives. The whole action was coordinated personally by Umarov, the head of the "Caucasian Emirate", with close ties to the intelligence service of Georgia, is told within the NAK (Drobotov, 2012).

As we see, the Sochi Olympics are represented as part of an attempt to bring home and normalize a problem-ridden region, through infrastructural and economic modernization as well as and crackdown on terrorists. In my view, the representation of the Caucasus as backwards and violent, where Russia is the only thing preventing anarchy, feeds on a long tradition of Orientalist representations about the Caucasus. Historically the Caucasus has been a significant Other, a symbolic "East" against which Russians have defined their homeland and themselves. Research on Russian orientalism has explored how 19th century poets, novelists and ethnographers created a narrative of a civilising mission, i.e. how the Russians brought progress and modernity to the savages of the Caucasus (Layton, 1995; Oye, 2010). The storyline that Sochi-2014 will make the North Caucasus more penetrable, developed and safe once again positions Russia as a civiliser. In addition, the exotification of the ethnic groups in the region, visible in the Olympic cultural programme, also echoes Orientalist clich s. To put it crudely: when contrasted against the Caucasus, the Russian self emerges as a force of modernity, embarking on a new "civilizing mission" in a backwards, violent and exotic region.

Contesting the dominant narrative

When the world s cameras and microphones are directed against Sochi and Russia, a seldom-seen chance emerges also for other actors to reach national and global visibility for alternative imaginations of community which seek to redraw boundaries and contest, challenge and renegotiate dominant narratives of the *us*. I will briefly discuss how some political contenders use the spotlight of Sochi-2014 to create media visibility for alternative projects of belonging. In different ways, they invoke certain identities (respectively "Circassian", "LGBT" and "Muslim") as the ground for alternative solidarities. In neither case to I claim that these projects speak for all who might feel some attachments to these identities.

Circassian interventions

One such attempt to disrupt the mainstream Russian narrative of the Sochi Olympics has been initiated from abroad, by members of the Circassian diaspora. The Circassians are an ethnic group with a long history in Northwest Caucasus, now to a large extent scattered in diaspora in the United States, Turkey and the Middle East. The 2014 Winter Olympics have, as Lars Funch Hansen (2013) argues, had a mobilizing and politicizing function on the Circassian diaspora. The Games have served to unite

a large part of this diverse diaspora behind the demands for recognition of what is perceived as a genocide performed by imperial Russia during the so-called Caucasian war, which ended in 1864 with the killing and deportation of millions of Circassians. Importantly, Sochi-2014 will take place not only on the 150th anniversary of the alleged genocide, but also on a very symbolic site: the ski slopes of Krasnaya Polyana, which is where tsarist forces once celebrated and paraded the victory over the Circassians. This has led to protests among Circassian activists all over the world, pleading for a boycott (Ibid).

The group NoSochi-2014, a project initiated by various diaspora groups, uses webpages and social media to spread the narrative that Russia hijacks the Olympics to continue its allegedly imperialist and repressive policies against the Circassians. The Circassian activists in the diaspora have so far been quite successful at using visibility-enhancing strategies, combining digital activism with street protests and other physical manifestations, e.g. during the 2010 Vancouver Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics. The diaspora protests has received some attention in Western media, and a Google search in May 2013 on "Sochi 2014" resulted in their website *nosochi2014.com* appearing among the first results, which indicates that the penetrative power of a medium is not necessarily tied to its access to institutional and financial resources. So far the impact on Russian mainstream media of these protest actions from the outside has been very limited. However, as Russia is increasingly part of a global media context where stories travel easily and media content is not always determined on a national level, this could change rapidly.

Thus, whereas the official narrative of Sochi-2014 displays a domesticated and kitschified version of Circassian culture as part of its celebration of multiculturalism and cultural richness, Circassian activists attempt to punctuate this story of harmonious conviviality by highlighting historical and political conflicts.

LGBT interventions

As mentioned above, the display of an inclusive and tolerant nation which is part of the Sochi project, ironically coincides with a nation-wide anti-homosexual campaign in Russia, epitomized by the law against "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships introduced in Summer 2013 (Persson 2013). Not surprisingly, attempts are being made by LGBT right advocates to use the spotlight of the Sochi Olympics to get attention — global and national — to their cause. In March 2012 a Russian LGBT organization tried to register a "Pride house" in Sochi, which was denied by both a local court and the Ministry of Justice, with the justification that it would contradict public morality and laws, promote homosexual propaganda, and provoke social and religious conflicts (gayrussia.com, 2013). In late Summer 2013, in connection to the World Championship in athletics in Moscow, the Russian gay propaganda law became a topic of heated international debate and social media campaigns, with several Western celebrities and politicians pleading for a boycott of the Sochi Games.

As we saw in the Circassian case, the Russian LGBT activists combine digital media with physical street manifestations to reach visibility in the media. The LGBT marches — or *gei-parady* as they are usually called in mainstream media — organized in Moscow during the last years, have shown how visibility-enhancing actions can

throw an issue into the public sphere. As a result, non-heterosexual existence, from having been marginalized, taboo and hidden, has become a major issue on the political agenda. Though at the time of writing, the outcome of the attempts to use Sochi-2014 to promote LGBT rights remains to be seen, the issue has already reflected very negatively on the international image of the Games.

Terrorist interventions

A third counterhegemonic project of belonging needs to be mentioned in this context. This is the possibility that violent groups will use the Sochi Olympics as a stage for a terrorist attack. Terrorism is in essence a means of political communication: is all about achieving visibility by using violence as a spectacle (Stepinska 2010). The events in Munich 1972 as well as the Boston bombings in 2013 show that sports events can be used as a venue for political terrorism. Even if one should probably not buy the connection sometimes made in state-controlled Russian discourse about a terrorist conspiracy between the Georgian government, the Circassian diaspora and Islamists, the possibility of terrorist violence is indeed a reality, as indicated by numerous events in recent Russian history such as the hostage takings at a Moscow theatre in 2002 and in a school in Beslan in 2004. In these cases, violent religious radicals used violence to spread a narrative about Russian suppression of Muslims in the North Caucasus.

The webpage Kavkazcenter is the main communication channel of the Caucasian Emirate, the most known radical Islamist organization. The site has often been the venue where the Emirate has published statements claiming responsibility for terrorist attacks (Simons 2010). Kavkazcenter is narrating the Sochi Olympics as the latest Putinist offensive in Russia s ongoing oppression of Muslims. One article calls the Sochi Olympics "an illegal and infidel merrymaking on Muslim soil", envolving "slavery-like exploitation and illegalities regarding Muslim workers from Central Asia at Putin s construction of 'Olympic objects'" (Kavkazcenter, 2013a). In July 2013, Doku Umarov, the leader of the "Caucasian Emirate", appeared on the webpage calling for Mujahedeen to stop the Sochi Olympics as part of a global jihad (Kavkazcenter 2013b). Thus, utilizing the nexus between spectacular violence, social media and mainstream media, Kavkazcenter represents another attempt to disturb the dominant narrative and to achieve global visibility for a competing imagination of community.

Concluding remarks

This article has investigated the upcoming Sochi Olympics as a mediated project of belonging, projecting certain narratives of what Russia is and who the Russians are, to the nation and to the world. The analysis illustrates how a global media spectacle like Sochi-2014 provides a unique opportunity to display elite constructions of belonging, but also a seldom-seen chance for other actors to disturb and challenge these and create visibility for alternative imaginations of community. I have identified some recurrent tropes in the dominant narrative of Sochi-2014. The Russia which is imagined and displayed here is a re-emerging great power — strong and united — but also an inclusive and tolerant place which can serve as an international example of ethnic and religious conviviality. This imagined community, however, rests on exclusions and silences. The narrative of modernization and normalization of the region echoes Orientalist motifs

of Russia as a civilising force in a backwards and violent Caucasus. In addition, three alternative projects of belonging, emerging from the Circassian diaspora, LGBT rights activists and Islamists, were examined. Although these are very different, they all attempt to use the spotlight of the Sochi Olympics to disrupt the mainstream narrative and create visibility for challenging imaginations of community.

On the more general level, the analysis tells us something about the media s role for politics of belonging in contemporary Russia. All Olympic host states use the international spotlight to display a preferred image of their nation, but in Russia the state has the power to mobilize all mainstream media channels for this purpose, resulting in a very homogenous, streamlined and uncritical narrative. Whereas much media research dealing with similar contexts equalizes state power with coercion, repression and censorship, the Sochi case illustrates how states adopt also positive media strategies attempting to maximize their visibility. In a communication environment where information travels faster than ever, and new interactive media forms enable ordinary people to "talk back", the Russian political regime cannot lean solely on censorship to maintain its power over which narratives dominate in the media. Attempts to silence, hide or ignore uncomfortable voices can instead give those oppositional narratives greater visibility nationally and globally. Therefore, we see an increasing use of softer visibility-enhancing communication strategies. This course of action, in contrast to censorship, fits the visibility dynamics of contemporary media. Spectacles like Sochi-2014, during which — for a short while — the attention of the world is focused on one spot, are an important part of this strategy of maximizing visibility. The intended result is something like a mirage, an image of perfection and wonder, displaying an image of the national self without cracks and contradictions. Such spectacles however come with a risk, as they might provide a global stage from which alternative versions of belonging can be displayed.

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