

For Putin, Sport Is a State Affair (Op-ed)

It is victory at any cost, because victory has political significance.

By [Andrei Kolesnikov](#)

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The semifinal of the Davis Cup in 1971 was no ordinary tennis encounter. And for Jan Kodes of Czechoslovakia, defeat was not an option. He was defending home turf, and the meeting in Prague pit Czechoslovakia against its archrival, the Soviet Union.

For Czechoslovak athletes and coaches at the time, any competition against Soviet athletes was a form of resistance to the invasion of Prague by Warsaw Pact troops three years earlier. Any defeat or victory was seen as a military defeat or victory.

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Alexander Metreveli, the Soviet player, would later recall that he could not understand why he was being held responsible for the Soviet tanks. On that occasion, too, Metreveli won, to

deafening court-side silence in Prague. For Kodes, it was a tragedy. He had failed not only himself, but his country, and at a time when it was under occupation.

And that was just tennis. The main confrontation between the countries was the long-running emotional standoff in hockey.

The puck hit by Czechoslovak defender Jan Suchy in the 33rd minute of the 1969 World Ice Hockey Championship match in Stockholm against the Soviet Union, in particular, had symbolic meaning. It was the opening shot, politically speaking, across the bow — or in this case, the goal — of the occupiers. 1-0.

"It is victory at any cost, because victory has political significance. It's soft power, the face of the country"

During the match, Czechoslovak player Vaclav Nedomansky, whose skill was infamous in the Soviet Union, gleefully hit Soviet goalie Viktor Zinger's posts hard enough to move them, having yelled something at the Soviet goalkeeper. Poor Zinger was taking the rap for the Soviet tanks and for the humiliation of the Czechoslovaks.

The tradition of sport acting as a kind of hybrid war has seamlessly continued into the post-Soviet period. Look no further than the 2014 doping scandal. Nothing has changed: It is victory at any cost, because victory has political significance. It's soft power, the face of the country, the image of an invincible nation ruled by a wise leader.

Soviet Olympic athletes were taught as much after World War II because the image of the Soviet empire rested on their medal count. It is no coincidence that the Soviet team didn't take part in the Summer Olympics until the Helsinki Games in 1952. They had to be sure their performance wouldn't tarnish Moscow's image. Likewise, the team only competed in the Winter Games in 1956 because the Soviet leadership was certain their hockey team could win. It did.

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This attitude was again palpable when the Soviet Union agreed to the Super Series hockey matches against Canadian teams in the NHL only in 1972. Prior to that, the Soviet Union feared defeat.

It made a return at the hockey final of the 2018 Winter Olympics, when Russia nearly lost to Germany. The photomontage put together by one blogger said it all: In the iconic photo of Soviet soldiers raising their banner over the Reichstag in 1945, he replaced the Soviet flag with a hockey stick and a Russian flag.

Sport is a matter of state importance. It's one of the tenets of patriotism. Patriotic films about sporting events are all the rage in Russia. "Legend No. 17" about the 1970s hockey idol Valery Kharlamov and "Going Vertical" about the victory of the Soviet basketball team over the U.S.

in the final match of the 1972 Olympics are just two. A lot of what happened was oversimplified and facts were distorted in these films, but they did awaken patriotic sentiment in Russia.

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With the 2018 World Cup, perhaps, Russian President Vladimir Putin aims to improve Russia's image using soft power. But in the eyes of the West, his regime is so toxic that attitudes to the country are unlikely to be changed by the football tournament.

The best Putin can do now is to ensure flawless organization, logistics and security. To this end, he has undertaken unprecedented efforts — almost like the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow under Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. After all, that was also a matter of state importance.

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