

IN THE RUN-UP TO THE BRICS+ SUMMIT

Russia's BRICS+ Soft Power Offensive in Fashion and Sport

Isolating Russia is a key element of the West's response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. However, this strategy has only been partially successful. After more than two years of fighting, Russia has found ways to circumvent economic sanctions and political exclusion. This year's BRICS+ summit, to be held in Kazan in October, is likely to illustrate this development. Russia will host a summit of the highest political and economic importance, bringing together leading powers from different regions of the world. This Spotlight unpacks and evaluates the effectiveness of Russia's efforts to counter Western isolationist strategies by using soft power initiatives in the areas of fashion and sport in the run-up to the summit.



Western flags are nowhere to be seen. But the Russian campaigns to counter attempts at isolation are not always successful. The closing of the 2024 BRICS Sports Games in Kazan, June 23, 2014. Photo: © picture alliance/dpa/TASS | Yegor Aleyev.

BY TABEA BÖING AND STEFAN KROLL

Since February 2022, Russia has waged a brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. Thousands have died and millions have been forced to flee. But Russia is fighting not only by military means. With governments in Asia, Africa and Latin-America as its main addressees, Russia also seeks to preserve and extend partnerships. Besides the areas of security, energy and trade, such efforts increasingly include more culturally oriented areas, such as sport and fashion. These soft-power initiatives have so far received only limited international attention compared to Russia's employment of hard power.

This Spotlight aims to address this issue by shedding light on how Russia is using soft power as a tool to increase its perceived legitimacy and to ensure behavior and decision-making conducive to its own goals and activities.¹ This is part of a wider attempt by Russia to develop its relations with what it calls the 'world majority'. This refers to countries in the global South that continue to maintain diplomatic and trade relations with Russia and to which Moscow presents itself as a victim of NATO and the West.² The Spotlight does not present a systematic analysis of perceptions of Russia's initiatives in the Global South. It uses illustrative cases to highlight the need for further research into this neglected aspect of international power.

THE NON-ISOLATED RUSSIA

For countering isolation attempts, the BRICS+ organization is of paramount importance for Russia. Originally set up for economic purposes, the organization now forms a geopolitical bloc that aims to provide an alternative to a Western-dominated international system. BRICS+ as an organization has not condemned the Russian aggression, and official documents refer to the respective national positions. Of the five BRICS founding members, only Brazil voted alongside of the majority of the international community in March 2022 in favor of United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES 11/1, condemning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, while India, China and South Africa abstained.³ Among the international organizations with global relevance, it is only BRICS+ where Russia can consider itself as an integrated actor. This is even more



Russian soft power: Russia likes to present itself as an attractive, successful partner. It is trying to increase its influence within the BRICS+ states. And its self-portrayal as an anti-colonial actor and alternative to a Western-dominated international system seems to be working well. Official photo of the BRICS+ Fashion Summit in November 2023. Taken before a panel session entitled „Made in BRICS+. National Brands – the Basis of the Single Market“. Photo: © picture alliance/dpa/TASS | Sergei Bobylev.

the case after the BRICS+ expansion that entered into force at the beginning of this year. BRICS+ now includes Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Ethiopia. None of these countries is known to have taken serious action against Russia's aggression. Against this background, this year's BRICS+ summit in Kazan is likely to be used as a tool to make Russia appear as a non-isolated and legitimized actor in international relations.

SOFT POWER AS A PERSUASIVE TOOL

Following its isolation in the international arena, Russia has increased its attempts to appear as a legitimate actor. While energy and trade relations have played a substantial role in this, Russia has also significantly increased its soft power ambitions. This can be observed in the run-up to the BRICS+ summit. Soft power refers to the ability of a country to use means of influence in such a way that other countries adapt their interests and preferences to its own. Hereby, the overarching goal is to appear as a legitimate actor. In contrast to hard power, the means of influence primarily include cultural and ideological areas as well as rules and institutions of international regimes.⁴

As shown in the following, Russia is increasing its soft power influence in the areas of sport and fashion. In its strategy, three persuasive factors become apparent. By hosting high-level events in Russia, it is increasing its foreign attractiveness. These events offer Russia a stage to present itself as a victim of Western economic exclusion. At the same time, Russia attempts to conceal its own expansionist agenda by claiming to side with former colonies.

FASHION DIPLOMACY

Given the key economic role of the fashion industry, it is not surprising that Russia is increasing its soft power efforts in this field. With a BRICS+ Fashion Summit held in Moscow in autumn 2023, fashion actors were brought together to join forces to play a greater role in this market. Together, the BRICS+ represent two-thirds of the world's population and account for more than 30 per cent of global GDP (Gross domestic product). According to the organizers, the Summit was attended by delegations from 60 countries and 200 international speakers. While the summit barely received any attention by Western media, media of participatory countries positively commented on the fashion summit, confirming the success of the event.⁵

Considering Russia's intentions behind its soft-power initiatives, it is important to look also at the political objectives of the summit. Like international political relations, Western fashion has been described as unjustly dominant and the summit as an opportunity to create an alternative. The BRICS+ showcased local designers and fashion brands, combining this with messages of greater diversity and cultural sensitivity in the fashion world. The summit included a series of panel discussions on fashion, brand development, sustainability and other topics.

A recurring and strong theme in the discussions was a counter-Western view, which in the summit magazine was directly linked to an anti-colonial perspective. Adama Amanda Ndiaye, a Senegalese fashion designer, argued here that local brands should be favored over Western brands because the latter are used as a means of "colonizing mentalities", and not only countries⁶. Russian designer Alexandra Kaloshina similarly called for a "decolonisation of design".⁷

RUSSIA'S SELF-PORTRAYAL AS AN ANTICOLONIAL ACTOR

Rather than simply employing anti-colonial narratives itself, actors from former colonies were brought to the fore, thus providing the appearance of legitimacy to Russia's self-portrayal as an anti-colonial actor. In the light of Russia's past and present colonial expansionist agenda, this self-portrayal seems cynical. However, Russia's use of anti-colonial narratives to distance itself from the West is neither new or surprising. In the past, Moscow has repeatedly presented itself as a supporter of former colonies, setting itself in contrast with the West, which is portrayed as an exploitative force.

Furthermore, Russia conceals its own colonial past as well as its contemporary expansionist motives behind the anti-colonial framework. This is not a

new strategy. Already during the Cold War, the Soviet government sought ties with the political leadership of former colonies struggling against colonial systems. Present-day Russia is attempting to capitalize on those historical ties in order to give its anticolonial claims a sense of legitimacy and credibility. At the same time, Russia is building on already established narratives and perceptions of the West as exploitative and colonialist. This juxtaposition is providing Russia with political leverage, allowing the suggestion that the BRICS+ states and Russia in particular are authorized to shape the agenda of the “world majority”.

THE BRICS+ GAMES AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO ESTABLISHED SPORTS EVENTS?

A more conventional field of Russian soft power initiatives is sport. The ban as a team from the Paris Olympics this summer was a hard blow for Russia, which has a long history of using international sport events for foreign policy aims. During the 20th century there have been several Olympic boycotts and bans. Most prominent, the US boycott of the Moscow games in 1980 and in return the non-participation of the Soviet Union (SU) in Los Angeles in 1984. As an alternative to its non-participation in Los Angeles—and to have another platform upon which to demonstrate its athletic and ideological strength—the SU organized the so-called “Friendship Games”.

This year, Russia planned again to host Friendship Games as an alternative to the Olympics, but the plan was postponed until 2025. This was a sign that the event did not attract the international attention that Russia had hoped for. It was the BRICS+ organization that offered another option. After all, the Games that took place in Russia this summer were the BRICS+ Games, a multi-sport event organized for the first time in 2017, with Russia hosting the games for the sixth time in 2024.⁸

COPYING A FORMAT IS NOT COPYING SUCCESS

Russia’s leaders may have hoped that the BRICS+ Games would provide a successful alternative to the UEFA European Football Championship, which took place at the same time, and to the Paris Olympics in August. This was, however, not the case. The number of participating nations is unclear, as the official website listed participating nations, such as Germany, which did not take part. In some events, only a few athletes competed, in one case only one. It is therefore not surprising that Russian athletes dominated the competitions.⁹ Many countries did not send their top athletes because they were preparing for the Olympic Games. The attention of poten-



Russian hard power: powerful, successful, ready for action, determined – the other side of the Russian self-image. It presents itself as an attractive ally and partner not only on the basis of trade and energy dependencies. Official photo of the from the websites of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (mil.ru). © Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (mil.ru).

tial spectators in Russia was also low, according to media reports.¹⁰

Overall, Russia’s failure to host a multi-sport event illustrates the difficulties of successfully applying soft power strategies in this area. The field of global sports has a huge potential to be used for soft power purposes due to the high level of public attention. However, it is obviously very difficult to copy the format of established events that have the power of attraction on the global stage. While both Russia and China have successfully used the established formats of the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup in the past, they have not been able to come up with an alternative that can seriously compete with internationally established sporting events.

Russia may have been successful in portraying itself as a victim of global sporting bodies, as the argument that the ban of Russian athletes would not affect the ongoing war has not only found resonance in Russia. However, the picture is more complex. There is indeed some evidence that Olympic boycotts and bans have little or no impact on political change within a boycotted or banned country.¹¹ But as this summer has shown, banning a team deprives a country of the opportunity to use the global stage of the event to distract attention from its misconduct in other areas. Furthermore, it illustrated the integrative power of the globally established events. Whether the resilience of the Olympics can also be regarded as proof of the success of the policy of the International Olympic Committee is a question for further research. It may be that this has had the effect of giving it greater global credibility, making it harder for Russia to organize solidarity against it.

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HOW PERSUASIVE IS RUSSIA?

This Spotlight argues that to successfully isolate Russia, its political and economic attractiveness must be taken into account. At the same time, it has become apparent that it is difficult to assess how successful Russia's soft-power ambitions actually are. While the BRICS+ Games apparently failed to increase Russia's attractiveness, the BRICS+ Fashion Summit was well received by various non-Western publics and enthusiastically commented on by non-Western fashion actors. This shows that Russia has the potential to find partners, not only on the basis of trade and energy dependencies, but also by proposing counter-structures and initiatives to the West. These initiatives gain conviction through Russia's self-portrayal as an anti-colonial actor and its use of anti-colonial narratives, as the example of the BRICS+ Fashion Summit makes clear. Against the backdrop of the varying success of Russian soft power initiatives, it remains to be seen what the long-term consequences of these initiatives

are. But even though some initiatives (see BRICS+ games) have had only limited success, they show how Russia is attempting to gradually expanding its influence within BRICS+. It is therefore important to closely monitor the development of Russia's soft power initiatives and to assign them greater prominence in Western foreign policy analysis.

PATTERN

The project "PATTERN: How Does the Past Matter? The Russian War of Aggression against Ukraine and the Cold War" examines whether and under what conditions lessons can be learned from the experience of the Cold War for dealing with current security policy challenges. As part of an applied history approach, it combines findings from contemporary history and political science.

PRIF SPOTLIGHT: The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) is the largest institute for peace research in Germany. PRIF sets out to analyze the causes of violent international and internal conflicts, carrying out research into the conditions necessary for peace and working to spread the concept of peace.

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