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Is ‘E’ for ‘EMPIRE’?: re-imagining new Russian identity through symbolic politics of ‘Sochi-2014’

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ABSTRACT
This article couples framing analyses with social identity issues to provide a critical discourse analysis of the Sochi Olympics Opening Ceremony, along with the various media depictions surrounding it. Moreover, it explores the idea of ‘derzhava’ as a rediscovered political narrative/frame in Russian symbolic politics. We argue that images and symbols alluding to different events in the past and present play significant roles in the social construction of people’s identities. Our lives are largely dependent upon what we tend to forget, and what we still remember. As the first impressions of the Sochi Olympics Games pass away, we are finally able to see what stayed hidden, and what was deliberately left in light. Relying upon the research on the connection between collective memory and social identity, we examine several Sochi Olympics events, seeking to identify what the organizers of the Games wanted us to remember, and what was meant to be forgotten. What symbols and signs were deliberately and repeatedly manifested to evoke Russian national pride? An analysis of two frames – ‘the frame of commemoration’ and ‘the frame of obliteration’ – helps to shed light on the veiled elements of new Russian social identity construction today.

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1. Introduction

In words of the German historian A. Assmann, it is our memory that makes us who we are: human beings with unique personalities (Assmann, 2012, p. 20). Therefore, our identities are largely dependent upon our memories, what we still remember, and what we have already forgotten. However, our memories are brought to life mainly by images and symbols that represent past events and play a significant role in the social reconstruction of one’s identities. French philosopher C. Castoriadis called them ‘symbols within the collective body of the imaginary social institutions’ (1975, p. 180). This article undertakes critical discourse analysis of the Sochi Olympics Opening Ceremony, along with its media

Whenever we are issued a uniform we are likely to be issued a skin. (Erving Goffman)
coverage, and discovered symbols that provide evidence in favour of the new emerging paradigm of Russia’s civilizational sovereignty – ‘derzhavnost’, officially used by Russian authorities as an attempt to regenerate and legitimize the eclectic conservative outlook rooted in Russian history, providing social support and cohesion.

To explore symbolic dimension of ‘derzhavnost’ we rely upon the idea of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 207) and the research on the connection between collective memory and social identity (Nora, 2010). We examine several events during the 2014 Olympic Games and their aftermath seeking to identify key elements of new Russian symbolic politics. In order to do so, we combine theory from ‘memory studies’ with the concept of the frame analysis (Goffman, 1986) to answer questions like what the organizers of the Sochi Games wanted us to remember? What was condemned to obliteration? Which symbols and signs were deliberately and repeatedly exposed to make audiences become proud of Russia, and which were hidden to abolish Russia’s traumatic collective memory of the past? Answering those questions can provide us with evidence of so-called symbolic capital – resources that available on the basis of prestige or recognition (Bourdieu, 1984) and used for the construction of reimagined Russian identity. We discuss further theoretical or practical implications of our results at the end of the article.

2. Literature review and methodology

Literature suggests that political myths and symbols generate social solidarity and identity by creating images of the past which are meant to resonate with the present, producing meaning for the current state of affairs (Gill, 2013, p. 4). The Russian expert S. Poceluev defines symbolic politics as a specific type of political communication, aimed at implanting a stable system of meanings through mock visual effects, rather than establishing rational judgements, moreover, political action can become a symbol in itself (1999, p. 62). We also know from M. Edelman’s works that the ritualization of political actions often occurs in the form of a political spectacle (1988, p. 120). New political myths would not be effective without making people believe in them. New narratives, new political myths, and heroes can be very effective in producing and reinventing such faith. As our analysis will demonstrate, mega events like the Olympic Games, mass media and entertainment industry can play key roles here.

Renowned Russian researcher O. Malinova defines symbolic politics as an activity related to the production of interpretations of social reality and a struggle for their domination. Both definitions of symbolic politics indicate that our identities are constantly contested by the production of new interpretations of social reality, targeting implantation of a new system of meanings. To be able to unveil elements of the Russian identity we can apply a concept of the frame analysis.

In this particular research, epistemological principles are close to what R. Pierce describes as the interpretative social sciences and paradigm of postmodernism (2008, p. 12). The latter can be the best method to use in situations when we have an incomplete set of observations about causality and rationality of actors and their choices. We apply inductive (broader generalizations from the interpretations of specific observations) and abductive reasoning, as well as the grounded theory approach. In a situation of limited access to data abductive reasoning (in reference to the Sochi events) can provide ‘the
best guess possible’. Therefore, we need to provide the reader with the likeliest possible explanation on the construction of new Russian collective identity (using the best information available) of what happened in Sochi in 2014 and afterwards. All the above can be used to form hypotheses, which in our case would be suggestion about the elements of new symbolic politics of ‘derzhavnost’, launched from the springboard of Russian Winter Olympics.

Abductive methodology proposes to make an educated guess after observing a phenomenon for which there is no clear explanation. Many important kinds of intellectual tasks including medical diagnosis, fault diagnosis, scientific discovery, legal reasoning, and natural language understanding have been characterized as abduction (Thagard & Shelley, 1997). Abductive reasoning is widely used by doctors, who make diagnoses, or judges, who make decisions, based on the presented evidence. We shall use abductive reasoning in the field of political philosophy and theory to observe and interpret the best explanation we can about the Sochi Games, in order to speculate and theorize in regard to what model of symbolic and identity politics Russian elites are (consciously or subconsciously) activating today. Abductive reasoning is a relatively weak (in comparison with deductive reasoning) form of synthetic inference of the case from a rule and a result, and therefore in principle multiple explanations might exist (Brachman & Hector Levesque, 2004, pp. 275–276). We offer our own interpretation relying upon the methodology of symbolic interactionism and the methodology of ‘framing’ as a metacommunicative concept. Framing, in this case, is the interactional use of devices, typically linguistic ones, and these can be traced via the abductive method (which actually is a tacking between inductive and deductive processes), because in our case we have a very limited knowledge of what was on the Sochi Game organizers’ minds. Even though we imply that individuals are not always rational, but that real causes or incentive of their collective political identification can be traced in language, which is never politically neutral. Language in case of this study is a language of symbols and metaphors evoked by the 2014 Sochi Games in Russia.

It is known that theoretical conceptualization of the framing phenomena goes back to G. Bateson, who in his 1972 book Steps to an ecology of mind wrote:

(c) Psychological frames are related to what we have called ‘premises.’ The picture frame tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame. Or, in terms of the analogy from set theory, the messages enclosed within the imaginary line are defined as members of a class by virtue of their sharing common premises or mutual relevance. The frame itself thus becomes a part of the premise system. Either, as in the case of the play frame, the frame is involved in the evaluation of the messages which it contains, or the frame merely assists the mind in understanding the contained messages by reminding the thinker that these messages are mutually relevant and the messages outside the frame may be ignored. … In the sense of the previous paragraph, a frame is metacommunicative. (Bateson, 1987, p. 193)

Later Erving Goffman explained how conceptual frames – ways of organizing experience – structure an individual’s perception of society and identity:

The individual comes to doings as someone of particular biographical identity even while he appears in the trappings of a particular social role. The manner in which the role is performed will allow for some ‘expression’ of personal identity, of matters that can be attributed to something that is more embracing and enduring than the current role performance and even the role itself, something, in short, that is characteristic not of the role but of the person—his
personality, his perduring moral character, his animal nature, and so forth. ... There is a relation between persons and role. But the relationship answers to the interactive system—to the frame—in which the role is performed and the self of the performer is glimpsed. Self, then, is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them. Just as the current situation prescribes the official guise behind which we will conceal ourselves, so it provides for where and how we will show through, the culture itself prescribing what sort of entity we must believe ourselves to be in order to have something to show through in this manner. (Goffman, 1986, p. 573)

Our research target is similar: ‘what sort of entity we must believe ourselves to be’ if looking at Russian society through the prism of symbolic politics provided by the organizers of the Sochi Olympics; when we do not know much about reality we can still analyse how people perceive and talk about this reality. George Lakoff explored framing in media as a strategy of political communication to promote specific interpretations of a political reality among the audience. Lakoff claims that frames determine our opinions and values as mental structures that influence our thinking, often unconsciously:

Communication itself comes with a frame. The elements of the Communication frame include: a message, an audience, a messenger, a medium, images, a context, and especially, higher-level moral and conceptual frames. The choice of language is, of course, vital, but it is vital because language evokes frames — moral and conceptual frames. (Lakoff, 2006)

The situation is similar when frame analysis is applied to political communication not only in relation to U.S. political framing, but also for symbolic politics in Russia. O. Malinova’s recent work on the comparative analysis of representations of the U.S. and China in the rhetoric of Russian Presidents V. Putin and D. Medvedev (2000–2015) is a good example of frame analysis. According to O. Malinova, when political leaders argue about their policy they expect that their arguments will correspond to particular frames able to provoke a desirable reaction from the audience. While the spectrum of reliable interpretations is considered wide enough, however, it is still limited by the established semantic repertoires. Therefore, the ways the politicians use the U.S. and China as significant others in their unprompted statements could say a lot about the possibilities and constraints created by such semantic structures (see Malinova, 2016).

The structure of this research project intends to explore two major frames through which the Sochi-2014 Games message was heard and interpreted. We called these frames (interactional modes of using linguistic devices): (1) the frame of commemoration and (2) the frame of obliteration. The first frame illuminates what the organizers of the Sochi-2014 Games manifested and wanted us to remember. The second shows what was hidden and what was meant to be forgotten. At the end of the article, we discuss what the unveiled elements of the new Russian identity are, applying both of these frames.

In order to examine and eventually uncover fragments of Russian collective identity, we analyse views and opinions of those who are relatively independent, ignorant of modern Russian media, faithless to the government, and often labelled as outsiders. As far as our abductive procedure goes, we applied a critical discourse analysis of the Sochi Olympics Opening Ceremony along with its media coverage. Our research deliberately selected media and intellectual discourses of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Armenia among others as reference points to reveal and refine repeating semantic elements of both frames of our analysis. The reason to choose these countries for the examination was that they share four important features: they were former republics of the Soviet Union,
they still have significant Russian Diasporas, and they maintain a high level of attention to and interest in the Olympics that were held in Russia. They are Russia’s geographical neighbours and have maintained intensive information flows and exchanges with Russia in general and about the Sochi Games in particular. Lithuania and Armenia, however, display different degrees of loyalty to the modern Russian government and are likely to spot and emphasize different positive and negative mechanisms of social identity construction inside Russian society, which suits them more. Overall, we had analysed 15 articles from 3 Baltic States and 10 from Armenia.1

3. The frame of commemoration: what did the authors of the symbolic politics of Sochi Games want us to remember?

As G. Lakoff emphasizes in a previously cited text, one of the most important instruments of symbolic politics is the language. Language itself is also an important tool of framing social mobilization. Peter the Great, for example, started his rule by reforming the Old Russian alphabet in 1711; the Bolsheviks also reformed it in 1918 right after the October Revolution in order to be better recognized. The Opening Ceremony of the Sochi-2014 Olympics with new interpretation of the Russian Alphabet is the most recent example: Russian letter ‘В’ ([W] in English) symbolizes ‘Helicopter of Igor Sikorsky’ (Russian ‘vertoliot’), Russian ‘Е’ [Ye] for ‘Catherine the Great’ (Russian ‘Yekaterina’) and Russian ‘И’ [E] for ‘Empire’ (Russian ‘emperia’). It has become an old tradition to reform the Russian alphabet together with a reconstruction of Russian political community. As we saw, the 2014 Opening Ceremony offered us a new interpretation of the old Cyrillic Alphabet, we believe those associations with letters were not random, instead, they were carefully chosen to bring successful memories of the past to life. In this part, we explore how these constructed associations became a clue for an interpretation of a new Russian social reality – a reality in which sport plays one of the key roles. We also investigate how that contest was accompanied by construction of a new supranational identity bridging over the old collective traumas of the Russian past.

The launching of a new Russian symbolic politics largely coincided with the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics – a mega event that became a springboard for the construction of Russia’s new collective pride. It was meant to capitalize on earlier Russian sport achievements, as well as Russian celebrity sportmen and women born in the U.S.S.R. The games gained symbolic capital for their countrymen between 1990 and 2014 with achievements of Sergey Fedorov, Maria Sharapova, ‘Alex’ Ovechkin and many other internationally recognized winter and summer sport athletes. This process began before February of 2014. In February of 2010, during the Closing Ceremony at the Vancouver Olympics, every step of Russia’s eight minute long Sochi-2014 presentation introduced new elements of symbolic politics, largely commensurate with new Russian power ambitions. It delivered a set of significant meanings and messages to the international community. For instance, the moment of passing the Olympic Flag was followed by the traditional Russian civilizational and imperial symbols and images: the Troika, Red Square, the Moscow Kremlin, Saint Basil’s Cathedral, Tchaikovsky museum, the 1937 Worker and Kolkhoz Woman sculpture on the background of the draw bridges of St. Petersburg, and the 1964 Monument to the Conquerors of Space, etc. The stars from the three largest Russian ballet theatres (in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Novosibirsk) represented
the unity and diversity of the former Russian Empire, while reflecting the mosaic of the modern Russian identity. The Russian Ballet performers wore special costumes representing different periods of Russian history and culture: folk Russia, imperial Russia, and the memory of the Great Patriotic (Second World) War.

In February of 2014, the Sochi Opening Ceremony supported a Russia-Centric picture of the world from the beginning. The expressions used by Russian TV presenters I. Urgant and I. Churikova were: ‘For the upcoming two weeks the centre of the universe moved to Sochi and everyone is welcome here’ (complete video of the Sochi-2014 Opening Ceremony, 0 min 50 s). The expression ‘Centre of the Universe’ fits well into the civilizational rhetoric. The Opening Ceremony started with the awakening of a little girl named Luba – a metaphor for the awakening (or rediscovery) of the new Russian identity, followed by an interpretation of the Russian alphabet full of references to the country’s imperial past: Sikorsky’s helicopter, Dostoevsky, Catherine The Great, Zhukovsky, Russian Empire, Tchaikovsky, Kandinsky, Nabokov, Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Chagall, Pushkin, etc. The Sochi version of the Russian alphabet ends with words: We, Love, Parachute, Eisenstein and Russia (complete video of the Sochi-2014 Opening Ceremony, 62 min 13 s). We believe, awakening Luba was setting a symbolic system of coordinates not only for the Olympic Opening Ceremony, but it also reflected search for ‘spiritual grounds’ (dukhovnie skrepi) of nation building conducted then by newly re-elected Russian President. We claim that the latter fact supports O. Malinova’s observation regarding Russian elites’ effort in 2012, 2013 ‘to expand the repertoire of the politically suitable past’ (2015, p. 183).

The awakening girl Luba can be seen as a part of the commemoration framing. From the beginning of the Opening Ceremony, the emphasis was made on the uniqueness of Russia as the largest country in the world, the first country that held such large-scale Olympic Games, the first to light the torch at the bottom of Lake Baikal, and the first that took the Olympic torch into space (letter ‘G’ in the Olympic alphabet – went for ‘Gagarin’ and the theme of Soviet Space). All of this served as geopolitical metaphors of the scope and outreach of the Russian world (Russkiy mir). The audience was meant to be overwhelmed with a sense of involvement, participation and an incredible sense of patriotism. The broadcast went on Russia’s ‘First Channel’ featuring close-up shots of people in the audience expressing their admiration of the Russian flag, anthem, and other symbols of the Russian state.

In 2014 the raising of the Olympic flag (together with lifting Russia’s national pride) was entrusted to Chulpan Khamatova – a Russian actress and philanthropist of Tartar origin, Lidiya Skoblikova – a six-time Olympic gold champion in speed skating, Anastasia Popova – a Russian journalist who directed a documentary about the 2012 war in Syria, Valentina Tereshkova – the first woman in space, Viacheslav Fetisov – an ice hockey star and the former Russian Minister of Sport, Valery Gergiev – the director of the Mariinsky Theatre, Alan Enileev – a young cyber sportsman, and Nikita Mikhalkov – a film director and an Academy Award winner, who also actively involved in the modern Russian politics. Well-known tennis player Maria Sharapova was among those who brought the Olympic Torch to the Fisht Stadium, together with Alina Kabaeva, Aleksandr Karelin, and several other sport celebrities. Finally, a former ice hockey goalkeeper Vladislav Tretiak and former figure skater Irina Rodnina lighted the Olympic Flame. Four of the aforementioned Olympic torch holders were also members of the parliament from the ruling party ‘United Russia’.
There is an interesting trend for Russian athletes to go into politics, which raises questions regarding motives. One can claim that they do so because there is a high demand for new influential actors capable of reinventing Russian collective identity in new Russian political space. There was a fashion for tennis celebrities under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin; when Vladimir Putin (a former 1975 judo champion of Leningrad) came to power, cohorts of this former sportsman joined Russian politics, namely speed skater Svetlana Zhurova, artistic gymnast Svetlana Khorkina, pair skater Anton Sikhharulidze, former professional boxer Nikolai Valuev and several others (Alba, 2011). Photos of their spontaneous on-the-spot interactions in the Russian parliament often got attention in the Russian media. Modern Russian politics offers former sport stars a repertoire of symbolic roles enabling them ‘to serve the common good of their community’ (Samye izvestnye sportsmeny-politiki, 2013). In addition, athletes surrounded by a nimbus of heroism can serve as an excellent advertisement for a political party. For example, a former Olympic champion in gymnastics Svetlana Khorkina, a member of the ruling party ‘United Russia’, was one of the ambassadors of the Olympic Games in Sochi. In an interview, she said that after the end of her sports career she wanted to continue raising the prestige of her country and helping people:

We are proud of Moscow-80, we will be proud of Sochi-2014. And then we will submit other applications and be sure to win the right to host another Summer Olympics. They want to defeat us, but we are strong in spirit. So beware, here we come! (Kozina, 2009)

As we saw, several Soviet sports stars played the ‘first violin’ within the framing of commemoration of Sochi-2014 Winter Symphony. Russian athletes were entrusted with sacral roles of ‘heroes’ and eventually were turned into actors of cultural memorization and symbolic politics with help of the Russian Media.

Politics and sport are always closely connected within media. The new cult of Olympic champions requires commemoration in the collective memory of a community. When ‘the party was over’, the Sochi Olympics was commemorated on ‘The Champions Wall’ opened in Sochi on the 7 February 2015. The Wall symbolically turned champions into national heroes and celebrated Russia’s victory, and the achievement of the largest number of gold medals ever the year before that. Meanwhile, a new film series about the victories of Russian and Soviet athletes was released on Russia’s central TV channels, including Legend 17 (the biography of a Soviet hockey star Valery Kharlamov, 2013), The Champions (Soviet champions in hockey, figure skating and biathlon, 2014), The Ice (youth hockey, 2014), The Shot (biathlon and Sochi Olympics, 2015), The Champions: four elements (about Alexander Karelin, 2015), and Slava (about the Soviet hockey star Viatcheslav Fetisov, TV series released on the First Russian Channel in May 2015). Alongside this, a number of anniversary TV shows was launched by Russia’s major channels where new Olympic champions were interviewed often displaying their patriotism and loyalty to the political elites. For example, on 7 February 2015 bobsledder A. Zubkov came to the Olympic TV release of Ivan Urgant Evening Show wearing a T-shirt saying ‘We will not allow anyone to offend Vladimir Putin’ (Ivan Urgant Evening Show, 2015). The ‘Sochi: a year later’ ice show was followed with a concert and ‘The ball of Olympic Champions’ on 8 February 2015.

Here are some of the illustrations of the persuasiveness of Russian Olympic symbolic politics within the frame of its commemoration. In support of Russian elites, American scholar noted:
Should not Obama himself have gone to Sochi – either out of gratitude to Putin, or to stand with Russia’s leader against international terrorists who have struck both of our countries? Did he not go because he was ensnared by his unwise Russia policies, or because the US media misrepresented the varying reasons cited: the granting of asylum to Edward Snowden, differences on the Middle East, infringements on gay rights in Russia, and now Ukraine? Whatever the explanation, as Russian intellectuals say when faced with two bad alternatives, ‘Both are worst’. (Cohen, 2014, p. 11)

Newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung became very popular in Russia during the Sochi Olympics. Its journalist praised the song ‘Not Gonna Get Us’ by the group Tatu, which was selected as the background music for the passage of the Russian national team at the end of the athletes’ parade (‘Inostrannye SMI’, 2014). The appreciation of Russia’s success and strength was shared by S. Lyall (The New York Times), who noted that Russia ‘had held an Olympics that were safe and secure and that, thrillingly to the home fans, demonstrated the restoration of Russia’s athletic might’ (Lyall, 2014). The Guardian testified to the triumph of Russia and its president:

His ice hockey team failed to follow the script. But just about everything else went to plan for a watching Vladimir Putin as Russia celebrated a rush of medals in Sochi with a triumphant closing ceremony on the shores of the Black Sea. (Gibson, 2014)

Armenian media coverage of Sochi Games is of special interest. Back in 2007, when it became known that the Winter Olympics of 2014 would take place in Sochi, heated debates took place in the Armenian society (20% of the population of Sochi are ethnically Armenian) and, while Georgia generally opposed the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Armenia sent its official congratulations to V. Putin. Later, during the games the renowned Armenian chief expert on information security Samvel Martirosyan commented: ‘The world watched the show, Russia delivered the show. At the same time Russia has been able to implement its effective national policy’. Martirosyan also noted that Russia ‘could clearly show to the world who she is and what its society wants to achieve’ during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Olympics (Martirosyan, 2014). According to the first chairman of the Central Bank of Armenia, Bagrat Asatryan, these Olympic Games became the most important in the history of the Third Republic of Armenia because they were held in Russia, which is closely connected to Armenia by political and economic ties. Therefore, these Olympics were covered in the Armenian media extensively (Asatryan, 2014). Moreover, he added:

Russophobes have nothing to say about these Olympics. The Games took place at the highest level, the way it should be. If the state possesses imperial ambitions, it must meet, or at least show that it meets its peoples’ expectations. The fact that Russia won the Olympic Games answers a lot of questions. (Asatryan, 2014)

People in Armenia often did not distinguish themselves from Russia. The Professor at Yerevan State University, Armen Gabrielyan, called them patriots not of their country. According to him, they were proud of their contribution to the history of Russia. Examples of this were numerous publications on the Internet delighted with the fact that the music of Armenian composer A. Khachaturian was played during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies (Masquerade and Sabre Dance correspondingly). This was not surprising for the Armenian citizens in general (many of whom had studied in the Soviet schools), but particularly to those who hold Russian citizenship, which makes 10% of the population
(National Statistical Service of the Republic of Armenia, 2015). These were not only nostal-
gic impulses for Armenians, but also an occasion to reflect on their self-identification.

4. The frame of obliteration: what was meant to be forgotten during and after the Sochi Games?

Why were some of the episodes related to the Olympic Games in Sochi exposed to the public to be immortalized and recorded to the greatest degree, while others were to be masked, forgotten or simply overshadowed right from the beginning? We can start approaching this question by looking at why the Sochi Games became an arena of competing symbolic politics in the first place. We claim here that negative and positive interpretations and symbolic representations of the Sochi Games and their organizers (Russian ruling elites) were launched long before the start of the Games. This does not surprise anyone because the so-called Big Events are often turned into arenas of a specific type of the information wars, which Gregory Tulchinsky explained as ‘the manipulation of the second level’ (Tulchinsky, 2013, pp. 244–245). Of course, any Olympics are beset by problems and concerns, but the worries ahead of the Sochi Olympics were extraordinary. For example, the process of short-listing the official mascots of Sochi-2014 has been described not only as controversial but ‘mired in political debate’ by some journalists (see Akopov & Volkov, 2014). Some experts pointed out how gross corruption and widespread mismanagement was, and how it undercut Russia’s representation of its great power status and its attempt to boost national patriotism (Gronskaya & Makarychev, 2014). Threats of terrorist attacks, the backlash to Russia’s anti-gay laws, and stories of journalists, showing up to find their accommodations unfurnished or unsafe, were exaggerated to a certain extent. Critical perspectives on Sochi in the Western media analysed by Raymond Taras also included civilizational stereotyping and the resurgence of nationalism of Russian ‘great power’ (Taras, 2013, pp. 37–38).

Particularly because several of the U.S. and the EU politicians skipped attending the Opening Ceremony and later some Ukrainian sportsmen left Sochi, the Games were framed in the media as a new version of the Moscow-1980 Olympic narrative (that followed the war in Afghanistan). Soon, after the Ukrainian crisis at Maidan escalated (the night of 21–22 February 2014, two days before the end of the Olympics), Sochi was turned from a sport arena to the arena of political contestation. For example, on 21 February 2014 Polish President Bronisław Komorowski congratulated the Ukrainian women biathlon team with their Olympic gold medal in the 4×6 km relay noting that their victory could be considered politically symbolic. Elements of the Sochi performances were becoming more and more politicized under those circumstances. Lithuania had supported the Polish concerns and found it very symbolic that at the very moment when the commentator said the word ‘Lithuania’ Russia’s TV advertising had been launched and both Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevicius and the Lithuanian national team remained unseen/forgotten after the broadcast. Moreover, in the same article Sarunas Černiauskas points out that the Lithuanian media saw the absence of any clear evidence on the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation in the framework of the Opening Ceremony of Sochi-2014 as a blow to Lithuanian national identity. That happened because the structure of Russian theatrical performance did not include any recognition of the mistakes made by Russia in its past (e.g. the occupation of Lithuania during the
Soviet period) and did not stress the fact of self-determination of the newly independent republics of the U.S.S.R. (Černiauskas, 2014).

However, our analysis shows that the media in these three Baltic States, namely Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, took different stands on the Sochi Olympics. We have explored texts on Sochi circulated through popular Russian-speaking portals in each of the three countries. Based on our research we have concluded that Lithuanian authors tried to show the Olympics ‘as a stage of struggle: the West against Putin’, and it posed a question as to whether the Olympics in Sochi should be considered as a political triumph of Putin’s regime (Yatskyavichyus, 2013). The situation looked different in Estonia and Latvia, where texts had less evident negative connotations, paying tribute to the high level of the Games, ironically regretting that the Estonian biathlon sportsmen and women lost to the better prepared and equipped athletes from Russia and Belarus (‘Olimpijskij Sochi’, 2014). The Latvian political expert Philipp Raevsky stated that the President of Latvia, Andris Berzins, had the courage to attend the Sochi Games in Russia and this can improve the trade relations between the countries:

If, for example, Obama had been there, no one would have noticed president Berzins. In this situation, when the West is trying to send Russia or Putin into political isolation, Russia after its Olympic Games will definitely notice all of those who came to the Opening of the Games. (Raevsky, 2014)

Besides the replacement of the visual images with advertisements, another example of hiding and veiling within the frame of obliteration is Russia’s uncomfortable feelings about the international recognition of Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian political analyst Ruben Mehrabyan said that Georgia complained frequently, first about the venue of the games because of the genocide of Circassians in the Russian Empire, and then about the fact that when the political map during the Opening Ceremony was shown, a cloud covered Abkhazia. At the same time, however, another cloud also covered Nagorno-Karabakh, contentedly remarks Mehrabyan, so political correctness was observed (Mehrabyan, 2014).

The story of how Russian TV tried to hide the fact that one of the Olympic rings stayed unopened during the Opening Ceremony was symbolic in every sense. As was discovered later, a Russian TV broadcast director who saw that the ring did not open for a few seconds launched a tape with a version from the Opening Ceremony rehearsals. That episode was later explained during the award ceremony ‘The event of the year’ by the Chief Creative Director of the Sochi Ceremonies Konstantin Ernst. In particular, he revealed the truth about why one of the rings at the Sochi Opening Ceremony was not opened. According to him, it was a fault of the Irish riggers who dropped the mechanic construction the night before and did not report the incident to him. Regardless of this, Ernst expressed pride for his country and his team saying ‘we still did not screw up’ (‘Ernst nazval vinovnyh’, 2014). Before acknowledging the fact of the mistake (Ernst called it ‘the notch’), the producer uncovered his white T-shirt with four opened and one unopened ring in front of the audience of the press conference the day after the Opening Ceremony. ‘The nod in the closing ceremony to the Olympic ring that failed to open in the Opening ceremony was both funny and clever. If the new Russia can good-naturedly laugh at itself, that’s not a small thing’, remarked the U.S. reporter Mark Sappenfield (Sappenfield, 2014) on that occasion.
5. Findings: the unveiled elements of the new Russian symbolic politics of ‘the derzhava’

We have already looked at two framing of symbolic politics of Sochi Games. Now it is the time to unveil elements of the new Russian symbolic politics in general. The chosen slogan of the Games was ‘Hot, Cool, Yours’. However, the question is did the Sochi-2014 Games become ‘yours’ or ‘ours’ equally for every citizen of Russian Federation? Much less attention was paid to the eastern and northern parts of Russia and the ethnic groups that live there, in comparison with the 2010 Vancouver Games in Canada, where indigenous people were represented. The South of Russia and the ethnicities of the Caucasian region happened to be rather underrepresented. As a result, when we talk about the necessity of preserving diversity, even the diversity among so-called visible minorities, one can expose the symbols of the Sochi-2014 Games to the criticism from the Critical Whiteness Studies. The term ‘visible minority’ was coined in Canada and meant a person or a group visibly not one of the majority race in a given population. In recent years academics have increasingly turned their critical attention from a range of positions to the subject of racial whiteness. Publications include historical accounts detailing the emergence of whiteness as a racial category, cultural studies explore the meaning of whiteness across a variety of locations, film and television scholars examining narratives about white people, reflecting white themes, white obsessions and white anxieties. The study of whiteness is increasingly perceived as central to the understanding of the operation of ‘race’ as a form of social categorization. As Sara Ahmed puts it:

> It has become commonplace for whiteness to be represented as invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked, as a non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance. But of course whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don’t, it is hard not to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere. (Ahmed, 2004)

So one can say that in the case of Sochi whiteness stayed relatively invisible because it had prevailed everywhere.3 In this respect, it is noteworthy that every official Sochi-2014 advertising image, for example, on the Sportloto lottery tickets, represented pictures of young people belonging to only one race – the white one. That, however, does not reflect the actual visual image of the local southern population of Russia where the Games actually took place.

Our analysis proves that Russia’s Sochi Olympics symbolic politics would rather be remembered as metaphorically represented with the little girl Luba of Slavic (white) origin. Especially because Luba’s story was continued during the Closing Ceremony, where the organizers had taken the little girl on a journey through the history of Russian civilization and the legacy of Great Russian music, literature and ballet. The symbolic outlook of Russia was shown through the image of the Slavic girl Luba. In a metaphorical sense, an important role was also played by the book that Luba held at the Closing Ceremony – the Sochi Games signified a new paragraph in the Russian identity’s ‘book’ per se.

However ‘whiteness’ and ‘ethnic diversity’ was not the main concern of the ideology of the Games. As the Sochi-2014 creative director Konstantin Ernst had confessed, the world expected us to show ‘bear, matrioshka and balalaika’ but we shocked them by organizing the most technologically advanced show the planet had ever seen, showing the huge
effort made to promote a new Russian image, grounded in the old imperial Russian traditions. The themes of Peter the Great, the period of Great Soviet industrialization and the Great Russian literature and music prevailed throughout both the Opening and Closing Ceremony. They all ‘pushed ahead’ the theme of the collective return back ‘home’ to the safe waters of the legacy of the Great Russian civilization. Russia was displayed as a unique, mighty and advanced civilization – ‘derzhava’.

Scholars have come up with different reasons why modern Russia makes choices in favour of civilizational sovereignty model. Among them: first, the emergence of new Russian nationalism by Pal Kolsto; second, Russia being seen as a subaltern Empire by Viatcheslav Morozov; third, an ideological dependency of Russian masses on the political ressentiment of Russian elites as stated by Eduard Ponarin; fourth, nostalgia for the mythologized Soviet Union by Marlene Laruelle; and fifth, limited ideological repertoire of Russian symbolic politics by Olga Malinova. F. Linde, suggested that Russia’s ‘ruling elite imagines itself as positioned on the summit of a paternalistic and values based state hierarchy, which is encircled by hostile forces’ (2016, p. 33). The key words here are ‘imagines itself’. Sharing some of the latter explanations, in this article we empirically explored how ‘derzhava’ as a political narrative and frame was launched during 2014 Sochi Olympics as one of the Russia’s collective ‘political imaginaries’, the term offered by Cornelius Castoriadis.

Looking at the majority of the mainstream Russian articles and commentators, we see that they argue in favour of the Sochi Olympic Games raising Russian patriotism and feeling of belonging to a great derzhava. As we explore what was meant to be displayed and remembered in a collective memory, the following quote is very relevant:

The Olympic Games in Sochi had shown to the world a new Russia: strong … the country that we want to respect. Experts assess Sochi 2014 not only as a victory of the country but also individual victory of Vladimir Putin. (Efremova, Mavrina, & Solopov, 2014, pp. 84–85)

One can see that many Russians take this personally. Russian authors note: ‘for us as the citizens of our country it’s hard not to be proud of the Great Russian derzhava’ (Efremova et al., 2014, p. 83).

Our analysis of the Sochi-2014 Games demonstrates indicators of the Russian exposure of its civilizational identity. Russian society displayed not only a need to belong to an abstract idea of derzhava but also an interest in a significant level of civilizational sovereignty and exceptionalism (on interpretations of ‘sovereignty’ in Russia, see Bowling, 2015).

However, even though a more nationalistic and imperialistic interpretation of the derzhavnost has won and remained dominant until today, in our view, evidence of mild Europeanism was also displayed as part of the Sochi symbolic politics. That was particularly seen in the Closing Ceremony in connection with the narratives about the Russian Jewish artist Marc Chagall, the well-known Russian writers and musicians such as Anna Akhmatova or Mikhail Bulgakov, the ambivalent and in every respect great personality of Sergei Diagilev and his project of Les Ballets russes. Those can be perceived not only as a Russia’s courtesy to Western taste but also as an attestation of Russia’s civilization being unique and yet inseparable from its European routes. Unfortunately, the latter somehow was less vocalized in the Russian intellectual discourse after the Olympic Games in Sochi and it still remains almost subaltern today. Therefore, objective scholars
can conclude: yes, in the newly interpreted alphabet ‘E’ was for the ‘EMPIRE’. However, we found that it was probably more correct to use ‘D’ – for the new reimagined image of Russian ‘DERZHAVA’.

6. Conclusion

What theoretical or practical implications does it all have for the contemporary Russian social and political life? We believe that Western concepts like ‘nation’ or ‘empire’ have a hard time describing modern Russian social realities. Decidedly, the Russian word ‘derzhava’ can be interpreted either as a state, mighty empire or even a civilization is more fitting. We believe that the related concept of Russian civilizational pride can be traced to the ‘Russia as a Third Rome’ discourse which arose during the fifteenth century (Batalov, 2000, p. 33) and was articulated in the word derzhavnost (belonging to a great country) later. The split between Western and Byzantine ideals of Russian civilization was already noted in the works of Arnold Toynbee (Hall, 2014, p. 35). However, there are several tensions between contemporary Russia’s political associations with the West today, therefore, the idea of Russian derzhavnost can enhance these existing tensions.

We agree with modern Russian legal philosopher Mikhail Antonov, who argues that sovereignty is often used as a powerful tool, which allows to set aside the international humanitarian standards and formal constitutional guarantees of human rights:

A key question is: does Russia (want to) form a part of this globalized world? If so, will it share common standards and principles with the rest of the international community? Or can one still consider the national state as an independent actor freely deciding if (and to what extent) it will be subject to international law, and to dismiss the globalization discussion because of its ideological nature? (Antonov, 2014, p. 7)

The notion of sovereignty still remains a part of Russia’s official political discourse and is framed within two major concepts. First is the concept of sovereignty of a ‘nation’ projected in the form of a political community of a nation state. The second concept is the idea of the uniqueness (unikal’nost’) of Russian civilization, modelled generally on the Russian collective imagination within the Russian Empire. Here, we are not limiting our claims to the fact that contemporary Russian elites only fall back on arguments of the so-called Slavophiles or XIX-century monarchists. Nonetheless, there are certain affinities between these old and new discourses that are revealed in the paternalistic political myth of ‘a good Russian Tsar’: he, a tsar, who should and will take care of every decent citizen of the Derzhava. A prime example of this phenomenon can be seen in the later works of Aleksandr Panarin, a XX-century Russian philosopher, who propagated the paternalistic concept of the so-called konsensus sluzhilogo gosudarstva (social consensus about everyone serving the Russian state). He stressed the importance of restoration of such vital concepts for Russia as self-sacrifice, discipline, and the powerful Russian state (zhertvennost’, distsiplina, i derzhavnost’). Panarin took these ideas to the extreme and had been referring to Joseph Stalin as ‘The Father of the Nation’ (Panarin, 2003). Moreover, he claims that a notion of the messianic role of the Russian state and the corresponding ideology of exceptionalism (osobyi put’) of the almighty Russian derzhava prevail. For example, Aleksandr Dugin, the leader of the International Eurasian Movement, notes:
A new Empire should be established as an Empire from its beginning [...] Empires were always built as an expression of a particular will to civilization [...] That is why today we should definitely say right from the beginning: not the Russian state but the Russian Empire; not a social and political evolution but a geopolitical revolution [...] Russians have not ended their battle for world domination [...] (Dugin, 2006, p. 894)

Russia’s recent political agenda illustrates that geographical belonging of Russia to Europe does not automatically make Russian elites follow the Western political standards. Noticeably, since the early 2000s Russian conservative political thinkers like A. Dugin or A. Panarin (from positions of cultural relativism) have been claiming that Russia possesses sovereign rights to protect its own politically acceptable standards of civilization, including standards of human rights. Panarin’s and Dugin’s concepts explain why politically it is a gargantuan task to discuss the issue of the accountability and the adherence of Russia to the regulations of the international law openly.

Symbolic politics during and after the Olympic Games at Sochi has clearly reflected this tendency and so did our two frames of analysis that have been explored in this article. In our opinion, Russian symbolic politics was partly targeted towards the sublimation of identity crisis and the traumatic memories, which many of its population lived through in the 1990s after the turmoil following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Over 50 billion roubles were invested in organization of the Games to leave the previous Russian collective traumas behind and re-polish the collective memory of a great civilization (also see Petersson, 2014).

Overall, our analysis of the Sochi Games shows a significant appeal to civilizational identification with Russia as a mighty derzhava. ‘Mental mapping’ of the Russian ruling elites’ and of the majority of Russian citizens still remains a key determinant in civilizational or imperial modes of political identification. The EU citizens (and a minority of so-called Russian Europeans (Fedotov, 1992, p. 180), on the contrary, identify themselves with civic nations or even cosmopolitan European networks. The ‘revanchist’ ideas of the Russian empire and an ethno-symbolic nationalism signify more strongly than ever a political meaning as decoded by the majority of the Russian population in the aftermath of the Sochi Olympic Games. The Games were originally planned as a ‘global event’ of positive political mobilization and rebranding of the Russian image in the world (the manifestation of Russia’s return to great power status (see Persson & Petersson, 2014, p. 192). However, the Olympic Games’ effect had partly overlapped, perhaps, even spilled over into the idea of an ‘all-Russia political mobilization’ (and securitization) across its new geopolitical horizons.

Symbols of rediscovered Russian identity, which were displayed during the Sochi Games, went far beyond the symbolic political dimensions. For example, on 14 July 2015, the Russian Constitutional Court decided that Russian courts must not enforce judgements of the European Court of Human Rights if it was the only possibility to avoid collision with a stipulation of the Russian Constitution. Institutional political changes in Russia can be challenging while people’s identities remain trapped within antagonistic and nationalistic political narratives. We believe that Russian political practice (and academic literature in some cases) still develops within the nation and empire centred worldview. In addition, there is significant literature proving our observation (Laruelle, 2008). Olga Malinova well described the evolution of the Russian official discourse and symbolic politics from pro-Western critique of communism in early 1990s towards ‘derzhavnost’ of the
second term of V. Putin’s presidency (2015). As we discussed in the last part of the article the launching of the Sochi 2014 symbolic politics had coincided and facilitated wider acceptance of derzavnost as a principle ideology for the legitimation of the currently ruling Russian elites.

Notes

1. Authors used the following web portals to retrieve the texts in Luthiania: http://www.kurier.lt; in Estonia: http://www.gazeta.ee and www.mke.ee; in Latvia: http://rus.delfi.lv; in Armenia: http://www.aravot.am. In Armenia we also conducted five semi-structured interviews in Armenian language. The limitations of these selections were lack of competences in our research group in relations to language of three Baltic States, which was partly compensated by texts retrieved in Russian and English languages.

2. Slava – the name of the hockey champion also means in Russia ‘the glory’. A word play used by the film advertisers to make alliterations with glorifying Soviet style posters.

3. Talking of the ‘whiteness’, one might find it funny but also symbolic the story of the last moment replacement of snow leopard with the brown leopard (because the white one does not live in the Caucasian mountains). The very last night everywhere ‘Barcik’ (the name of the leopard mascot) was attempted to be repainted from white into the brown sand colour. However many full size puppets still remained white throughout the Games. Even in the official cartoon of the Games leopard stayed white.

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