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**Place marketing and mega events: Intentions  
and short-term results of nation branding of  
Russia through the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic  
Games**

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## **Abstract**

In an increasingly complex environment, nations favour using mega sporting events and the Olympic Games in particular as opportunities to project their images to the outside world. The scale of the Olympic Games and its popularity has grown over time, and each modern event steps beyond its sporting agenda, having a much stronger social impact than ever before. The current paper is grounded in a substantial theoretical base around the concept of a “nation brand” and the process of nation branding through mega events and the Olympics in particular. It is followed by a case study of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics. A two-stage interpretative qualitative study, consisting of interviews and a public survey, was employed to reveal that nation branding was indeed one of the major aspects of the Sochi 2014 communication strategy. However, it is argued further that the event’s long-term impact on public perception of the country is not evident, despite the high quality of the organisation process and a warm reception of the event itself. It is argued that state-influenced nation branding and the damaging impact of politically resonant events, which followed the Olympics, on Russia’s reputation are among primary causes why success was not sustainable. The research paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for policy makers.

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## 1. Introduction

The notion of place branding through sports has become a recent valuable addition to broader national and regional branding strategies. In some cases, sport even acts as the focal point of a larger set of image-building measures, as it brings unquestionable tangible and intangible benefits to the hosting community, receives wide media coverage, and encourages identity building through common bonding and shared emotions (Rein and Shields, 2006). Through its 'major cultural influence, with an explicitly political dimension', sport became a tool of proclaiming 'national autonomy on a global stage', especially for small and developing nations (Tomlinson and Young, 2006: p.2). Between other sport-related branding initiatives, bidding for and hosting mega sport events is argued to be the most credited one (Rein and Shields, 2006). The Olympic games is a sports spectacle which unquestionably belongs to 'a select number of prestige 'mega-events', '[d]efined as festivals that achieve sufficient size and scope to affect whole economies and receive sustained global media attention' and which 'have an ambulatory character and are normally subject to a bidding process by potential hosts' (Gold and Gold, 2008: p.302).

Throughout its history, the Olympic movement experienced a drastic transformation, and the modern Olympics barely resemble the earlier events of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, let alone the tournaments from the times of ancient Greece, when the Olympic ideas had a more religious rather than secular character (Girginov and Parry, 2005). The increasing media and public attention given to the Summer and Winter Olympics, and recently, to

the new project of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Youth Olympic Games (Judge, Petersen and Lydum, 2009), resulted in raising the profile of these events so that bidding candidates are willing to sacrifice vast amounts of resources in order to gain the status of a host city and benefit from branding and transformational opportunities (Berkovitz et al., 2007; Gold and Gold, 2008; Müller, 2012; Zhang and Zhao, 2009). Indeed, the impact of the Olympics on host regions and the accompanying urban and infrastructural development only increased from the rebirth of the Olympic Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the modern era (Table 1).

Global awareness of the Olympic games often positively influences reputations of host cities, providing opportunities for successful competitive place branding (Anholt, 2007). Consequently, the Olympics nowadays spread their influence far beyond sports, and is argued to stimulate a whole set of changes. The Games are seen to have a significant impact on host cities and host communities, accompanied by promises of virtually endless benefits for everyone affected (Boykoff, 2014a), resulting in what has been labeled as 'festivalisation of city politics' (Häußermann and Siebel, 1993 cited in Preuss, 2007).

Summer Olympic Games	Winter Olympic Games
<p>PHASE ONE: 1896-1904</p> <p>Small scale, poorly organised and not necessarily involving any new development.</p>	<p>PHASE ONE: 1924-1932</p> <p>Minimal infrastructural transformation apart from sports facilities.</p>
<p>PHASE TWO: 1908-1932</p> <p>Small scale, well organised and involving construction of purpose built sports facilities.</p>	<p>PHASE TWO: 1936-1960</p> <p>Emerging infrastructural demands, especially transportation.</p>

<p>PHASE THREE: 1936-1956</p> <p>Large scale, well organised and involving construction of purpose built facilities with some impact on urban infrastructure.</p>	<p>PHASE THREE: 1964-1980</p> <p>Tool of regional development, especially transportation and Olympic Villages.</p>
<p>PHASE FOUR: 1960-2004</p> <p>Large scale, well organised and involving construction of purpose built facilities with significant impacts on urban infrastructure.</p>	<p>PHASE FOUR: 1984-2006</p> <p>Large-scale urban transformations, including multiple Olympic Villages.</p>

**Table 1.** The changing infrastructural impact of the Summer and Winter Games, 1896-2002 (Source: Chalkley and Essex (1999); Essex and Chalkley (2004), cited in Essex, S. and Chalkley, B., n.d.)

Among the primary causes for hosting mega-events, authors focus on such notions as economic impact (Crompton, 1995; Gratton, Shibli and Coleman, 2006; Szymanski, 2002), urban regeneration (Hall, 2006; Gold and Gold, 2008; Essex and Chalkley, 1998; Davies, 2010; Müller, 2012; Sadd, 2009), place branding at a national and international levels (Alekseyeva, 2014; Bodet and Lacassagne, 2012; Zhang and Zhao, 2009; Xing and Chalip, 2006; Vanolo, 2007), and many others. Recently, a lot of attention is focused around sustainable mega-event legacy in an attempt to make the event-related changes and achievements last longer than the event itself (Chappelet, 2012; Preuss, 2007). Therefore, events in general and mega-events in particular are 'regarded as one of the hallmarks of modernity' (Hall, 2006, p.59) and connect to various aspects of social life with an impact on culture, tourism, art and many other fields (Bowdin et al., 2011). Even sporting matters in global sport events are now more often overtaken by other issues related to social, economic, marketing, symbolic, and other objectives of governments and organising bodies (Bodet and Lacassagne, 2012).

In particular, mega-events are increasingly regarded as a global platform for 'reconstruction and repositioning of emerging economies', where 'the effects of mega-events tend to be even more incisive, as they occasion lavish investments and comprehensive building programmes valued in tens of billions of dollars' (Müller and Pickles, 2015: p.122-123). One of the recent and most illustrative examples of such events is the Sochi 2014 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games<sup>1</sup>. The idea that the event was used to project the image of the new Russia to the outside world has been extensively discussed in the academic literature (e.g., Müller, 2014; Alekseyeva, 2014; Ostapenko, 2010; Persson and Petersson, 2014; Matthews, 2014). Moreover, one can clearly identify the point based on the vision of the Organising Committee, promoted by its president Dmitry Chernyshenko:

*Sochi 2014's efforts are driven by a simple yet very powerful vision: to stage the most innovative Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games that the world has seen, celebrating the spirit of new modern Russia and delivering sustainable positive change that inspires the world (cited in Inside the Games, 2010).*

Thus one could argue that "celebrating the spirit of new modern Russia" was essentially a nation branding exercise aimed at re-imaging the ex-Soviet country in the eyes of an international audience through the Olympics, a mega-event with worldwide media coverage and guaranteed attention from a global audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Whenever the Sochi Olympics, the Sochi Games, the Sochi 2014 project or similar are mentioned throughout the paper, it implies both the Olympic and Paralympic events (unless stated otherwise), as the communication strategy of the project was essentially a single whole for its Olympic and Paralympic counterparts.

This paper studies the subject of nation branding through mega-events and the Olympics in particular, focusing on a case study of the Sochi 2014 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The research questions that informed this study are:

**RQ1.** How did the notion of nation branding of Russia through the Sochi 2014 Olympic and Paralympic games influence the work of the Organising committee?

**RQ2.** What are the current perceptions of Russia among a foreign audience?

**RQ3.** To what extent did the hosting of the Sochi Olympics influence perceptions of Russia?

A two-stage interpretative qualitative study, consisting of interviews and a public survey, was employed to address these questions. The paper begins with a review of the literature on nation branding, before providing contextual background on the Sochi Olympics. The methodology presents the process of data collection, before the results and discussion sections analyse the findings. The paper then concludes with some implications that arise from the research.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Nation brand: A complex and controversial term**

In order to survive and prosper in a modern competitive and rapidly changing global environment, countries need to employ outstanding place brand-building strategies (Rein and Shields, 2006; Dinnie, 2008) to secure

recognition and enhance their reputation for national goods and services. It also allows a country to establish an unparalleled national brand personality at commercial and political levels (Sun and Paswan, 2011). Some countries have gone as far as establishing special government bodies and introducing corresponding laws to promote their nation brands (Fetscherin, 2010). However, Alekseyeva (2014), for instance, supports Anholt's argument that state-led nation branding is a dangerous exercise, as increasingly open access to information can easily reveal incoherence between the promoted message and real actions:

*[T]he vast majority of communications-based place "branding" exercises, currently carried out by cities, states and regions, are nothing more than naked, ineffectual and indefensible exercises of state propaganda, and thus are even less likely to modify public opinion than before (Anholt, 2010 cited in Alekseyeva, 2014).*

Nevertheless, nation branding is a significantly growing trend, whose potential and effectiveness draws strong attention from researchers, advisors and national governments, striving collaboratively to work out successful image-improving measures and branding campaigns (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010). Indeed nation branding is 'an exciting, complex and controversial phenomenon' (Dinnie, 2008: p.13), thus may be viewed from different perspectives.

Fetscherin (2010) proposes a comprehensive definition considering many aspects of a country brand:

*A country brand belongs to the public domain; it is complex and includes multiple levels, components and disciplines. It entails the collective*

*involvement of the many stakeholders it must appeal to. It concerns a country's whole image, covering political, economic, social, environmental, historical, and cultural aspects. The main objectives of country branding are to stimulate exports, attract tourism, investments and immigration, and create positive international perceptions and attitudes (pp.467-468).*

Anholt (2007, 2010) however argues that the term “nation branding” is only a useful but rather arrogant metaphor, a dangerous myth, which misleads policy makers and creates assumptions that popular perceptions of a nation can be manipulated similarly to corporate brands through advertising and marketing. For Anholt, ‘this thing called “branding” is not about communications but about policy change’ (Anholt, 2008: p.2). The author therefore suggests the term “competitive identity” as ‘a new model for enhanced national competitiveness in a global world’ aimed ‘to describe the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion’ (Anholt, 2007: p.3). Similarly, Kavaratzis (2010) admits that place branding is not communicating desirable message to the audience, but taking real actions and making the world aware of them.

Dinnie (2008) sums up:

*When applying the concept of a brand to nations rather than to mere products, there is an ethical obligation to do so in an honest, respectful manner and to acknowledge the limits of how appropriate it is to treat nations as brands. Nations do not belong to brand managers or corporations; indeed, if they ‘belong’ to anyone, it is to the nation’s entire citizenry (p.15).*

Indeed, nations or places as such cannot be branded in a sense of inventing a desired perception of a subject, thus any process of achieving (or earning) a

better nation image can only be regarded as adding value to existing perceptions (Gudjonsson, 2005; Anholt, 2010). Therefore, the term “nation brand” is understood through two dimensions: the message projected by decision makers, and the image perceived by the target audience, while it is admitted that branding as a process, when related to a country, represents adding value rather than constructing it.

## **2.2. Place promotion and nation branding through the Olympic Games**

Sports in general and sport events in particular are increasingly used by regional and national governments for the purposes of place promotion for domestic and international audiences, acting as a side theme or even taking centre stage in branding initiatives (Rein and Shields, 2006). Tomlinson and Young (2006) define a global sport spectacle as ‘an event that has come to involve the majority of the nations of the world, that is transmitted globally, that foregrounds the sculptured and commodified body and orchestrates a physical display of the body politic, and that attracts large and regular followings of on-site spectators for the live contest or event’ (p.3).

Nevertheless, few host cities or nations would spend vast resources on a globally transmitted spectacle and not use it as an opportunity for self-promotion. Nation brand does change over time even in the absence of mega-events, but their presence certainly helps to achieve nation-branding objectives in the short or long term at a more substantial level (Fetscherin, 2010). Furthermore, these objectives are usually inseparable from politics, as international sport festivals have long been associated with politics and

ideology from ancient era to modern times all over the world (Tomlinson and Young, 2006). This connection is particularly evident in the case of the Olympics. Despite Coubertin's vision of Olympism standing above politics, nowadays few would argue that 'the Olympic myth is rooted in a very political vision of the world' (Persson and Petersson, 2014: p.197). Therefore, '[t]he notion that the Olympics can sidestep politics is one of the guiding fictions of our times, and one propped up by major players in the Olympic movement' (Boykoff, 2014a).

Berlin 1936, for instance, was the first 'iconic and politically resonant' (Gold and Gold, 2008: p.304) mega-event, which is believed to have its main objective in showcasing the national image and superior strength of Nazi Germany, as well as its athletic superiority, despite doubtful ethics behind it (Rein and Shields, 2007, Persson and Petersson, 2014, Yao, 2010; Essex and Chalkley, 1998).

The Olympics in Tokyo in 1964 aimed at improving the nation's reputation after World War II, and securing long-term economic benefits for the country by strengthening the quality of 'made in Japan' label through the values of peace, democracy, and technological achievements (Berkowitz et al., 2007; Yao, 2010).

More recently, Beijing 2008 was used as a way to promote the image of friendly and open China, a country with a long-term 'roller coaster relationship with the Western world' (Sun and Paswan, 2012: p.642). Having successfully integrated the bid into the national idea of the Chinese 100-year-old Olympic dream (Berkowitz et al., 2007), the organisers with the support of the

government aimed 'to use the Olympics as a window into their progress from a third-world country to a powerful free market economy' (Rein and Shields, 2007: p.78). Despite the critique for focusing on image promotion to the outside world and gentrification rather than considering domestic needs (Zhang and Zhao, 2009), the event was a success, and its overall positive effect on people's perception of China's image in general has been studied rather profoundly, employing different methodological approaches (for example, Bodet and Lacassagne, 2012; Sun and Paswan, 2012; Yao, 2010). However, it is hard to determine whether such effects are deep and long-term, and which proportion of this improvement can be attributed to the event (Bodet and Lacassagne, 2012).

Nevertheless, the Beijing Olympics was a success from an international perspective, which celebrated the globalisation of the mega-event industry and marked a shift from hosting mega events predominantly in Western Europe and North America (Müller, 2012; Müller and Pickles, 2015), becoming a blueprint for using a mega-event as a medium for transmitting national soft power, especially in emerging and newly industrialised countries (Rein and Shields, 2007; Alekseyeva, 2014).

Another country integrating sport in many activities of its nation branding strategy is South Korea. The image of an industrialised country was promoted with help from the hosting of the Seoul 1988 Olympics and the Korea-Japan FIFA World Cup in 2002. It is also expected to build this image further with the hosting of the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics that are actively supported by the Presidential Council on Nation Branding, established in 2009

to deliver government-led branding initiatives in collaboration with other institutions (Ferrand, Chappelet and Séguin, 2012).

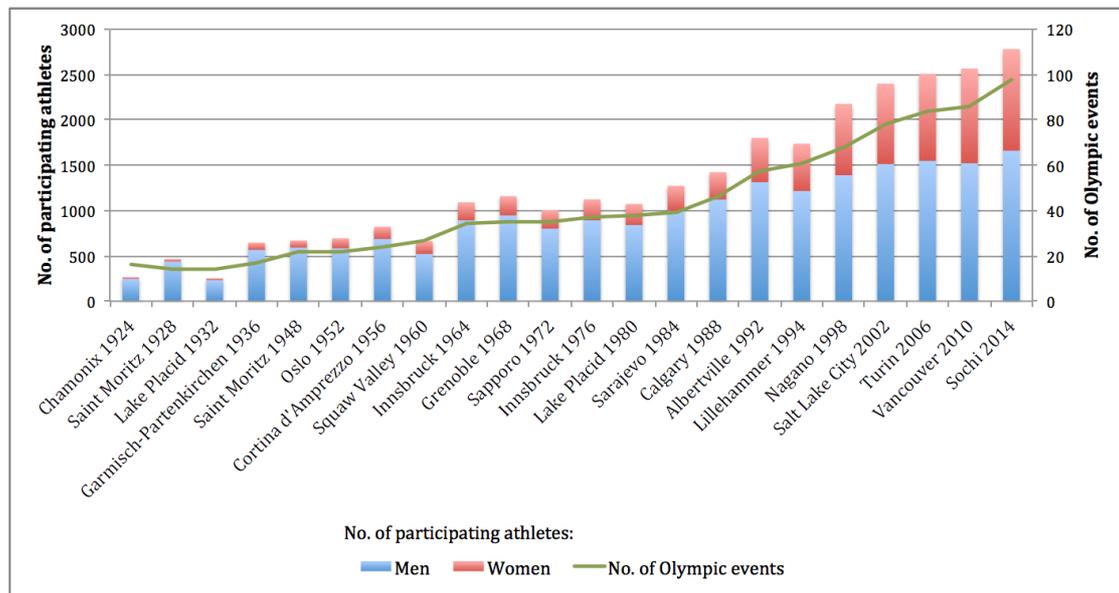
Finally, one of the latest and most illustrative examples drawing a lot of academic and media attention is the XXII Olympic Winter Games and the XI Paralympic Winter Games hosted in 2014 in the Russian city of Sochi. In Russia specifically, 'national political and international geopolitical considerations script the comprehensive narratives of modernisation and recognition that underpin the hosting of mega-events' (Müller and Pickles, 2015). Thus the 2014 Winter Olympics, as the dominant project of the Russian mega-event agenda, was aimed at obtaining international recognition and projecting the image of the new Russia to the rest of the world (Müller, 2014), to declare national strength and great power status (Alekseyeva, 2014), and ultimately, to 'reshape the "red bear" image' (Ostapenko, 2010: p.60) through what Persson and Petersson (2014) termed as intersections of two major paradigms: Olympism and the Russian great power myth. The main theme was 'trumpeted very plainly by the Sochi Games: Russia is back as a major global player, and doesn't care how much it costs to show it' (Matthews, 2014: p.13).

However, during the preparation period, various issues were widely discussed by the media and researchers (see Arnold and Foxall (2014) for a substantial pre-event overview of potential threats). As Dutch journalists Rob Hornstra and Arnold van Bruggen (2013) put it in their extensive investigation of the Russian Olympic project, 'the story of modern, prosperous Russia is set

against a backdrop of contrasts: poverty, refugees, violence, and human rights violations’ (p.5).

### 2.3. The Sochi Olympics: Highlights and context

The Sochi Olympics ‘was one of the biggest events in 2014, not just for Russia but also for the world’ (Müller, 2014, p.628). Considering the number of Olympic events and the number of participating athletes, it also became the largest event in the history of the Olympic Winter Games (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Numbers of participating athletes and sport events in Olympic Winter Games, 1924-2014 (Source: compiled from IOC, 2014).

Shortlisted from the initial set of seven applicant cities<sup>2</sup>, Sochi received the status of a Candidate City along with Salzburg (Austria) and PyeongChang (Republic of Korea) in 2006, and was subsequently elected as the Host City in the second round of voting (Table 2) during the 119<sup>th</sup> session of the IOC in Guatemala on 04 July 2007 (IOC, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Notably, the Sochi 2014 project was the third attempt of the Russian resort city to host the Olympic Winter Games after two failed bids for 1998 and 2002 Olympics (Arnold and Foxall, 2014).

Round	1	2
Sochi	34	<b>51</b>
PyeongChang	<b>36</b>	47
Salzburg	25	

**Table 2.** Distribution of votes of the IOC members at the election of the Host City for the 2014 Winter Olympics (Source: IOC, n.d.).

The decision to award the event to Sochi has been labeled as controversial (Persson and Petersson, 2014). First of all, intensified by the dispute around attending the IOC election sessions by heads of bidding states (Grohmann, 2009), the idea that Putin’s convincing speech in Guatemala influenced the IOC’s decision is not groundless, and alleged lobbying could have taken place (Shaw, 2008). As the project evolved over time, it became clear that it is ‘so tightly linked to Putin personally that the unity behind Sochi-2014 is hard to separate from the unity behind the president’ (Persson and Petersson, 2014: p.199). To support his “pet project”, the president spent most of his holidays skiing in a nearby resort in Krasnaya Polyana (which later became the Olympic Mountain Cluster) and started holding state receptions in his Sochi residence (Arnold and Foxall, 2014). Another crucial factor to stimulate the debate on the election results was the unplanned appearance of Juan Antonio Samaranch, a former IOC President (1980-2001) and Spanish ambassador to the Soviet Union, whose first-round win at the IOC presidency election was partially indebted to the Soviet bloc at that time (Pound, 2006), and whose influence in the Olympic world was still strong in 2007. Thus it could be argued that his presence could potentially influence the election results and secure the slight majority of votes for Sochi after Salzburg’s elimination (Miller, 2012).

However the controversy around the bid was only the first challenge to the project's image. To begin with, 2014 marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the officially unrecognised genocide of 300,000<sup>3</sup> Circassians (an ethnic group originally from the Northwestern Caucasus) by the Russian Empire in the Sochi region, which entailed a strong opposition campaign "No Sochi 2014" by the Circassian diaspora based in New Jersey. They stated that staging the Olympics in Sochi, which they consider their historic homeland, was a continuation of Russia's repression of their people (Morris, 2011; Alekseyeva, 2014; Arnold and Foxall, 2014; Boykoff, 2014a; Persson and Petersson, 2014).

Furthermore, the location of Sochi in close proximity to the separatist republic of Abkhazia resulted in Georgia's numerous appeals for relocation of the event and further protests against Russia's support of the breakaway republic (Morris, 2011). The country declared a boycott of the Games in 2011, which, however, was called back a year later, when a pro-Russian prime minister came to power (Arnold and Foxall, 2014).

Also, Sochi is virtually surrounded by Russia's most unstable regions in the North Caucasus. The most serious threat came from the so-called Caucasus Emirate, a radical organisation originating from the times of Chechen Wars in 1996 and 1999, expressing direct intentions that the Olympics would never happen (Arnold and Foxall, 2014). Generally, very serious concerns were raised regarding security during the Olympics long before the event started, and the question eventually 'took precedence over economic issues and

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<sup>3</sup> Some sources estimate the number at 625,000.

became central to ensuring that the safe conduct of the Games would promote a positive image of Russia and its leaders at home and abroad' (Zhemukhov and Orttung, 2014: p.26). All in all, while all the Olympics in general 'are subject to security threats, those in Sochi in 2014 are without parallel in terms of the magnitude of those threats' (Arnold and Foxall, 2014: p.8).

A further concern was that the local community as a major stakeholder also struggled to find substantial individual benefits, thus people were more concerned about potential negative impacts (Müller, 2012). Those unfortunate ones, who lived on the way of the Olympic construction, had to be resettled with compensations reportedly below market prices (Alekseyeva, 2014), which also drew a lot of attention in terms of violation of human rights (HRW, 2013), though 'early dramatic stories regarding the resettlements proved to be exaggerated' (Wurster, 2013: p.8).

Another reputation-related issue is Russia's long-term policy regarding the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community, leading to a refusal to register their Sochi branch (Alekseyeva, 2014). Notably, one of the explanations why the infamous federal law against "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations" was introduced regardless of the international resonance it caused is that it was aimed to unite conservative anti-Western movements inside the country to support Putin's regime after protests in 2011 (Arnold and Foxall, 2014). Matthews (2014) further argues that it is an integral part of a broader strategy to unite 'large, silent majorities' of conservatives around the world under the Kremlin command (p.12).

Other matters in question included (but were not limited by) Russia's top-down approach to administration of the Games, alleged corruption, exploited labour of migrant workers, and severe pollution (Arnold and Foxall, 2014; Alekseyeva, 2014; HRW, 2013).

Finally, the event was overwhelmingly expensive, which led to an extensive discussion in the media, aimed to understand whether such expenditures could ever be justified. The 'federally guaranteed US\$12 billion infrastructure improvement programme' was presented in the Sochi 2014 bidding book (Sochi-2014 Bidding Committee, 2006). As the event approached, it became clear that budget overruns are unavoidable. The independent Russian Anti-Corruption Foundation estimates the total cost at US\$45.8 billion, based on open-source information (The Anti-Corruption Foundation, n.d.). Müller (2014) mentions the most frequently reported figure of US\$51 billion, however, estimates the total sum of operational costs, sports-related capital costs and non-sports-related capital costs even higher, at just under US\$55 billion, with 96.5 percent of funding being public money. As Yaffa (2014) critically puts it, '[h]ow the Sochi Games grew so expensive is a tale of Putin-era Russia in microcosm: a story of ambition, hubris, and greed leading to fabulous extravagance on the shores of the Black Sea'. To summarise, the connection between the event's strategic mission with projecting the national brand of Russia is not unfounded, but at the same time, various issues outlined above could not go unnoticed and inevitably left their imprint on the project's reputation.

### **3. Methodology**

The study will aim to answer the following research questions, influenced by the literature review with a consideration of information and resources, available for the researcher:

**RQ1.** How did the notion of nation branding of Russia through the Sochi 2014 Olympic and Paralympic games influence the work of the Organising committee?

**RQ2.** What are the current perceptions of Russia among a foreign audience?

**RQ3.** To what extent did the hosting of the Sochi Olympics influence perceptions of Russia?

#### **3.1. Exploring nation brand**

As derived from the literature review, nation or country brand is a complex and highly intangible phenomenon which can be viewed from different angles and consequently, rather hard to define and measure.

Nowadays the two most cited nation brand evaluation techniques are Anholt's Nation Brand Index and Futurebrand Country Brand Index, each of which has its advantages and followers, though there is no evidence on the superiority of any of them.

The online survey-based Nation Brands Index (NBI) is the outcome of an international poll representing 'the sum of people's perceptions of a country across six areas of national competence', which 'measures the power and

appeal of a nation's brand image, and tells us how consumers around the world see the character and personality of the brand' (Anholt, 2005).

The second global study of nation brands is Country Brand Index by FutureBrand. The agency conducts quantitative research collecting data from international opinion-makers and business travellers, and combines it with qualitative data derived from the interviews with experts in global policy and governance (Futurebrand, 2013). The two methods, both primarily based on subjective perceptions of nation brands, are used in many research projects (Fetscherin, 2010). However, their commercial and proprietary nature results in the lack of methodological transparency (Fetscherin, 2010; Sevin, 2014).

From a broader perspective, Zenker, Knubben and Beckmann (2010) distinguish between three approaches to exploring a place brand: qualitative analysis based on free brand associations, quantitative measures based on questionnaires on different attributes of a given brand, and a group of various mixed methods. Either adapting and tuning methods from other disciplines or developing new techniques specifically for place brands, researchers generally 'use data gathering and analysis methods available in virtually all social science disciplines' (Sevin, 2014: p.48).

### **3.2. A qualitative approach**

The present study will employ a predominantly qualitative approach to studying nation branding of Russia through the Sochi Olympics for two major reasons. First of all, a comprehensive quantitative research method would require pre- and post-event data collection, which was not possible

considering the timeframe of the given project. Taking into account the research questions, the second reason for choosing qualitative analysis lies in the core purpose of the current study, also underpinned by the chosen constructivist epistemology and interpretivist perspective on theory. The aim is not to find the objective truth or unambiguously prove any assumptions, but to get a deeper insight of the subject within its context, considering people's subjective opinions and the researcher's own reflections (De Vaus, 2001; Gray, 2014). Gray (2014) also notes that generally qualitative research is not unified and 'can adopt various theoretical stances and methods, the latter including the use of observations, interviews, questionnaires and document analysis' (p.161).

### **3.3. Research strategy and data collection**

The active part of the research will consist of two major stages. The first stage aims to get comments and insight from the experts in the field, who were directly involved in the Sochi 2014 games organisation process. Purposive sampling (Gray, 2014) was employed to contact higher-level managers from the corresponding functional areas of the Organising committee and its contractors, whose work included, above all, picturing the brand of the Sochi 2014 Olympics (and Russia as its host country) in the eyes of a domestic and international audience. Five people expressed their interest to take part in anonymous semi-structured interviews (Table 3).

No.	Organisation	Functional Area	Type of the interview	Duration	Date of the interview
1	Organising committee	Communications	Face-to-face interview	19 min	11 August 2015
2	Contractor	PR	Face-to-face interview	42 min	12 August 2015
3	Organising committee	Look of the Games	Face-to-face interview	19 min	12 August 2015
4	Organising committee	Brand Management	Face-to-face interview	20 min	14 August 2015
5	Organising committee	Communications	Written response	-	Received on 21 August 2015

**Table 3.** Details of the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen aiming to fully ‘explore subjective meanings that respondents ascribe to concepts or events’ (Gray, 2014: p.386). The researcher ensured that leading questions were avoided to retain validity, and that particular questions were based on the literature review rather than on personal views. All the respondents received the information sheets with the research summary and the interview questions in advance, and signed individual consent forms before each interview.

The aim of each interview was to discuss the communication strategy of the Sochi 2014 project, the notion of presenting the new image of Russia to the rest of the world through the high-profile mega-event, and the influence of this notion on the work of the Organising committee, in an ultimate attempt to answer the first research question.

The second part of the research is a public survey. Non-Russian respondents were invited to take part in an online questionnaire containing two free word-

association tasks and additional questions to understand the sample's demographics. The online survey was created and administered using Qualtrics software. Non-probability convenience sampling (Gray, 2014) was employed, using various social networks and online communities to reach a desired amount of respondents, initially set at 100 people at least.

The survey was inspired to a great extent by the work of Bodet and Lacassagne (2012) on international place branding through sporting events (particularly, a perspective of British citizens on the Beijing 2008 Olympics), underpinned by the theory of image transfer and the co-branding process<sup>4</sup>. As a co-branding process, the strategy of place branding through major sporting events 'is closely related to the appreciation of its impact on people's knowledge, perceptions, opinions and prejudices', therefore the social representation theory is commonly employed as one of the efficient ways 'to assess people's thoughts, perceptions and opinions of a specific object' (Bodet and Lacassagne, 2012: p.363). The organisation of a social representation, in turn, is based on free word-associations, which is qualitative in nature and reflects real-life experience and vision of the audience (ibid.) Therefore, the current research is based to the highest available degree on the study of Bodet and Lacassagne (2012), but tuned to study the co-branding process between Russia and Winter Olympic games particularly, at the time when the Sochi games is still the latest major Olympic event.

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<sup>4</sup> Co-branding is defined as 'a brand alliance that involves either short-term or long-term association or a combination of two or more individual brands, products, and/or other distinctive proprietary assets' (Rao and Ruekert, 1994 cited in Xing and Chalip, 2006). Xing and Chalip (2006) study this two-way image transfer between event image and destination image, while Bodet and Lacassagne (2012) argue that the theory 'remains theoretically relevant' in the case of the Olympic games in particular, given the strength of the Olympic brand and the nature of the organisational process and its stakeholders (p.362).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Stage 1: The interviews**

The interviewees undoubtedly expressed their deep personal and professional involvement in the project. Complex tasks set in very difficult environment, accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility – these are the common characteristics of the Sochi Games given by the respondents. At a personal level, they all agreed that the Olympics was an unforgettable experience, a powerful historic moment to be cherished, as it will probably never happen again.

#### **4.1.1. The vision**

The grounding statement which set the tone of all the interviews was the strategic vision of the Organising committee, declared by its president Dmitry Chernyshenko: ‘to stage the most innovative Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games that the world has seen, celebrating the spirit of new modern Russia and delivering sustainable positive change that inspires the world’ (Inside the Games, 2010). All the respondents unambiguously confirmed that the vision indeed strategically defined the major approach to the mission of the Organising committee, and all the projects and activities within its different departments complied with the vision declared long before the event started. Below the vision is split into three parts representing these objectives with supporting arguments derived from the interviews.

- 1) “To stage the most innovative Olympic and Paralympic games that the world has seen...”

The preparation process and the event itself employed a variety of innovative techniques, applied first of all to the management process:

*‘I am absolutely sure that the most innovative achievements were used in the work of all the functional departments <...> We developed some of them from the scratch, making the preparation process fundamentally different from what was happening in the rest of the country’ (Interviewee 3, 12 August 2015).*

Apparently, a fundamentally new approach to project management in Russia in the case of the Sochi 2014 project was primarily defined by the scale and complexity of the task, as well as the fact of staging Winter Olympics for the first time in the national history:

*‘Analysing the cases of the past, <...> I have come to a conclusion that Sochi 2014 was the first Winter Olympic games, which was staged based on the standards for Summer Olympics. <...> From the very beginning we have been presented with a task of staging Big Games. We were making a huge celebration’ (Interviewee 2, 12 August 2015).*

- 2) “...celebrating the spirit of new modern Russia...”

This part of the vision is one of the core determinants of the current research, as it represents one of the very few links of academic literature, studying Russian national branding through the event, with the official event agenda.

Notably, Interviewee 1 repeatedly pointed out that the task of the event organisers is to stage the Games, but not to project the image of a country or touch upon any other political objectives. Therefore, staff members of the

Organising committee are probably not the right people to ask about such impact of the event. This is a good point to express certain limitations of the chosen panel of interviewees. However, inferring from the same interview, the Organising committee could not operate in vacuum and was responsible for redirecting information flows between various stakeholders, which means that they were very familiar with the operating environment and broader objectives of the Sochi Olympics. Indeed, all the other informants agreed that presenting Russia to an international audience was a substantial part of the event mission. Sochi 2014 definitely had much broader objectives than many previous Winter Olympics, stretching beyond merely sporting agenda, taking into account many circumstances not familiar to other organising committees of any previous Games. It is not crystal-clear whether these objectives directly underpinned or significantly influenced day-to-day operations of the staff, but their overall importance is hardly questioned:

*'[T]he project as a whole indeed was aimed at presenting new innovative Russia, a young country, and strived for breaking existing stereotypes'* (Interviewee 4, 14 August 2015).

*'[T]he general principle, that this is our platform we could use to say whatever we want to say, remained unchanged all the time'* (Interviewee 2, 12 August 2015).

*This aspect was part of the vision, therefore it determined the messages that we delivered throughout the Games and during the preparations'* (Interviewee 5, received on 21 August 2015).

However, the aforementioned notion became a double-edged sword: from one side, it actually secured a desired degree of synergy, accumulating resources and best practices from all over the country. From the other side, it

admittedly added some nervousness, as the actual level of responsibility was very high.

3) *“...and delivering sustainable positive change that inspires the world.”*

Back in 2007, the Evaluation Commission had very few doubts about the Sochi 2014 Environmental and Sustainability programme (IOC, 2007). However, a lot of concerns about the event’s environmental impact appeared as the Olympics approached, intensified by the lack of transparency of related policies for the public (Arnold and Foxall, 2014). Nevertheless, the interviews identified certain solid positive outcomes of Sochi 2014:

*‘[T]he Games became the most innovative event, <...> because we actually used effective tools not only in my functional area, but also in all the others <...> for the first time in the country and remained as the event legacy not only for the sports industry, but also for the whole nation’* (Interviewee 3, 12 August 2015).

According to statistics provided by Interviewee 5, the number of Russian people engaged in sports increased from 14.2m in 2007 to 16.7m in 2014; the first national standard for “Green construction” and considerations for accessibility have been introduced; state-of-the-art sport and supporting infrastructure has been created in Sochi, turning the city into a year-round resort; a volunteering culture is now being further developed in Russia; and so on.

Overall, this is a valuable addition to very few post-event academic papers, which yet again tend to be as skeptical as the majority of previous research. Nevertheless, the difficulty here is to define what is a sustainable change

inspiring the world, and how to unambiguously prove that a certain change has been caused precisely by a given event. Undoubtedly, the event brought definite positive changes in many fields at least at a national level, but the degree of inspiring the world is quite hard to estimate, especially considering its extremely global reach, both planned and achieved.

#### **4.1.2. A predetermined perception**

The Sochi Olympics and Russia as its host country were under strong media pressure, raising worldwide attention to the preparation process and the event itself to a very high level. According to Interviewee 2, the Sochi 2014 communication strategy at an early stage resembled an active defense from bullying. Similarly, Interviewee 1 defined the main task of communication-related functional departments of the Organising committee as a redirection of communication flows ensuring the synergy of all the processes within a given context.

In addition, the whole process was complicated by predetermined perceptions. Some respondents highlighted that the overall attitude at the beginning of the event was initially quite skeptical. It is one of the reasons why the overall number of international visitors and sport fans in Sochi was quite low. In some cases, journalists deliberately wrote negative articles, sometimes even directly dictated by editorial tasks. Nevertheless, the IOC as the main governing body have always been very satisfied with the preparation process and in the end, highly rated the event itself. This suggests that despite negative coverage of the project in mass media, the organisers met all the

official requirements of the IOC, International sport federations and other supervising bodies. But the overall public perception of the Sochi 2014 project was still at a rather low level, partially formed by media influencers. Consequently, all negative assumptions could only be dispelled by the event itself, for which the Organising committee were well prepared:

*'We've adapted the structure of Communications from London 2012. I[t] proved to be effective. <...> The core of the structure was the Committee itself <...> which enabled us to coordinate our efforts and to stay in sync with our messages'* (Interviewee 5, received on 21 August 2015).

This was also the right time to step away from the strategy of defense against bullying and start communication activities based on the principles of mutual respect. Arguably, the turning point was the infamous malfunctioning ring at the Opening ceremony, which created a lot of media buzz, but also unexpectedly marked the time when everyone directed their attention to sports, as it finally became the focal point of the whole project.

*'I mean, it is generally such a huge complex mechanism, that you cannot avoid the times when "a ring would not open". But luckily, this unopened ring was the only one. <...> Everyone was responsible for a particular part, but when the parts were combined together, the whole thing worked <...> till the end of the Paralympics. <...> {B}y the third day the level of negative attitude declined, and then almost disappeared by the fifth day'* (Interviewee 2, 12 August 2015).

Hence the event itself had a huge impact on even the worst skeptics. This idea, among other discussed topics, received the strongest unanimous agreement of all the interviewees.

*The event was staged at a deserving level. All the international feedback on the Games, including the feedback from the press, pointed out the highest level of the Games organisation, presumably, the best of its time. The bar was lifted very high, and Russia has delivered what it had promised (Interviewee 1, 11 August 2015).*

Moreover, respondents not only expressed their personal experience-based views, but also referred to other sources, such as the survey by Nielsen, discovering very high approval ratings of the Sochi Olympics among Russian citizens (Vedomosti, 2014), or a compilation of short video interviews with regular visitors from all over the world unmistakably recalling the Olympic slogan “Hot. Cool. Yours.”, and sharing their positive spectator experience (Sochi2014, 2014).

#### **4.1.3. Impact on the nation brand**

The Sochi Winter Olympics was the most televised event of its kind, thus it had a certain image-related impact beyond its sports agenda.

As noted earlier, the Sochi 2014 project exceeded expectations of many. The fact that the Organising committee met all its commitments was not questioned by any of the interviewees. Therefore, considering its initial objectives, scale and global media coverage, one could extrapolate the event’s influence to a perception of the whole country. As some respondents put it, the Olympics indeed made the wall between Russia and rest of the world thinner, and many stereotypes about the country were broken, as Russia defended its deserved status of the Olympic host country. On the contrary, Müller (2014), for instance, does not find any evidence of improving

the national image of Russia, pointing out that negative attitudes to the country only increased virtually everywhere except China, not just after the event, but also during the preparation process. But what is more noteworthy, '[f]or most other countries, however, whatever gains in global approval and recognition the Sochi Olympics may have secured for Russia were eventually wiped out by its role as an aggressor vis-à-vis Ukraine' (Müller, 2014: p.648). The current paper does not aim to touch upon any political issues, but this rather sensitive but important statement was still presented to the respondents for discussion, as little literature is currently available on the subject. Some of the respondents shared their thoughts:

*'I think the potential of this event was unbelievable but <...> has not been used at all. I am sincerely sorry for what is happening right now, and unfortunately, today no one remembers Sochi and the Games. All the bad things <...> overshadowed Sochi so much that today some people deliberately do not see what had happened there'* (Interviewee 2, 12 August 2015).

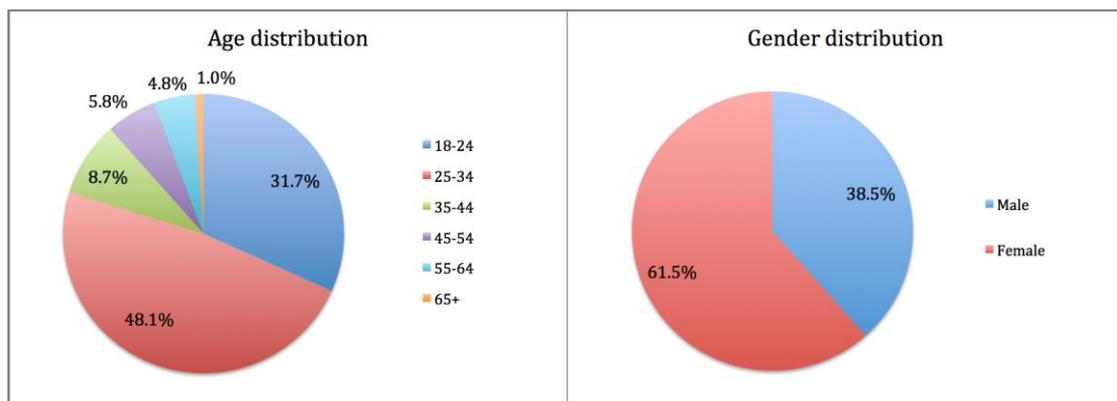
*'I will express my own opinion. When the situation with Ukraine evolved, you just realise at some point that eight years of your life are down the drain'* (Interviewee 3, 13 August 2015).

*'I can give you my personal opinion. I think it is actually true. <...> [W]e fairly see that the political and economical environment diminished the efforts to show our innovativeness and readiness to host modern international events and to project our new image effectively'* (Interviewee 4, 14 August 2015).

## 4.2. Stage 2: The survey

As derived from the interviews, there was no specific segmentation of the Sochi 2014 foreign audience, therefore, the population for the survey was defined as any non-Russian residents including or older than 18 years of age. The sample size was 104 respondents. Considering the population size, it is very limited and does not allow any generalisation of findings (which is a limitation of the study), however, Bodet and Lacassagne (2012) note that such sample sizes (the authors themselves surveyed 129 individuals) are rather common for similar studies, as 'above a certain threshold, new and additional information gains become marginal', which is 'especially the case with objects which are strongly socially anchored such as the Olympic Games' (p.364). Moreover, the study is qualitative and interpretative in nature, thus it aims to explain the meaning of findings rather than to generalise them.

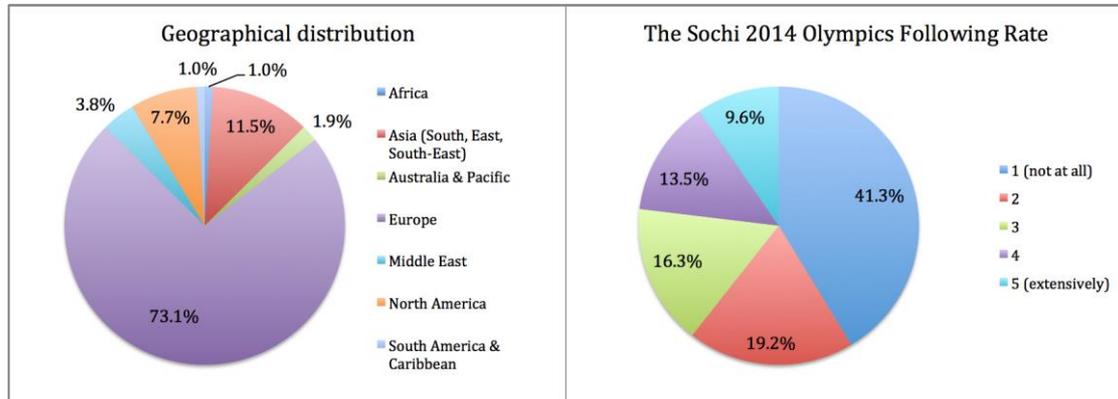
Demographic and other characteristics of the sample are presented further.



**Figure 2.** Age and gender distribution of the surveyed sample.

The surveyed sample represents a holistic mixture of demographic characteristics, however, with notable skewness towards younger age (79.8% of the respondents are between 18 and 34 years old), with a majority of

female respondents (61.5%), and living in Europe (73.1%). On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extensively), the average rate to which the respondents followed the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics is 2.31 (SD=1.38).



**Figure 3.** Geographical distribution and Sochi 2014 following rate.

Due to the number of participants and the nature of a free word-association task presented to them, the survey retrieved a large amount of associations for both terms (i.e., 395 unique items for “Winter Olympic Games” and 414 ones for “Russia”). Following the logic of the model research, the items were grouped according to their semantic similarity, ‘as social representations rely on main concepts rather than very detailed and specific idiomatic terms’ (Bodet and Lacassagne, 2012: p.366).

	“Winter Olympic Games”		“Russia”	
	Association	Mentioning rate	Association	Mentioning rate
<b>Words above a 15% threshold</b>	Snow	53.85%	Cold Weather	49.04%
	Skiing	50.96%	Putin	49.04%
	Cold	39.42%	Vodka	39.42%
	Sports	28.85%	Moscow	32.69%
	Medals	25.96%	Large Territory	28.85%
	Ice-Skating	25.00%	Russian Culture	25.96%
	International	22.12%	Communism	18.27%
	Competition	21.15%	Danger	16.35%
	Winning	19.23%	Snow	16.35%
	Snowboarding	19.23%		
	Russia	19.23%		
	Celebration	16.35%		
	Sochi	15.38%		
<b>Words in a 10% - 15% range</b>	Bobsleigh	14.42%	Power	14.42%
	Athletes	14.42%	Russian Women	14.42%
	Ice	13.46%	Soviet Union	12.50%
			St. Petersburg	12.50%
			Corruption	11.54%
			Siberia	11.54%
			Cold War	10.58%
			Russian Language	10.58%
			Ukraine	10.58%

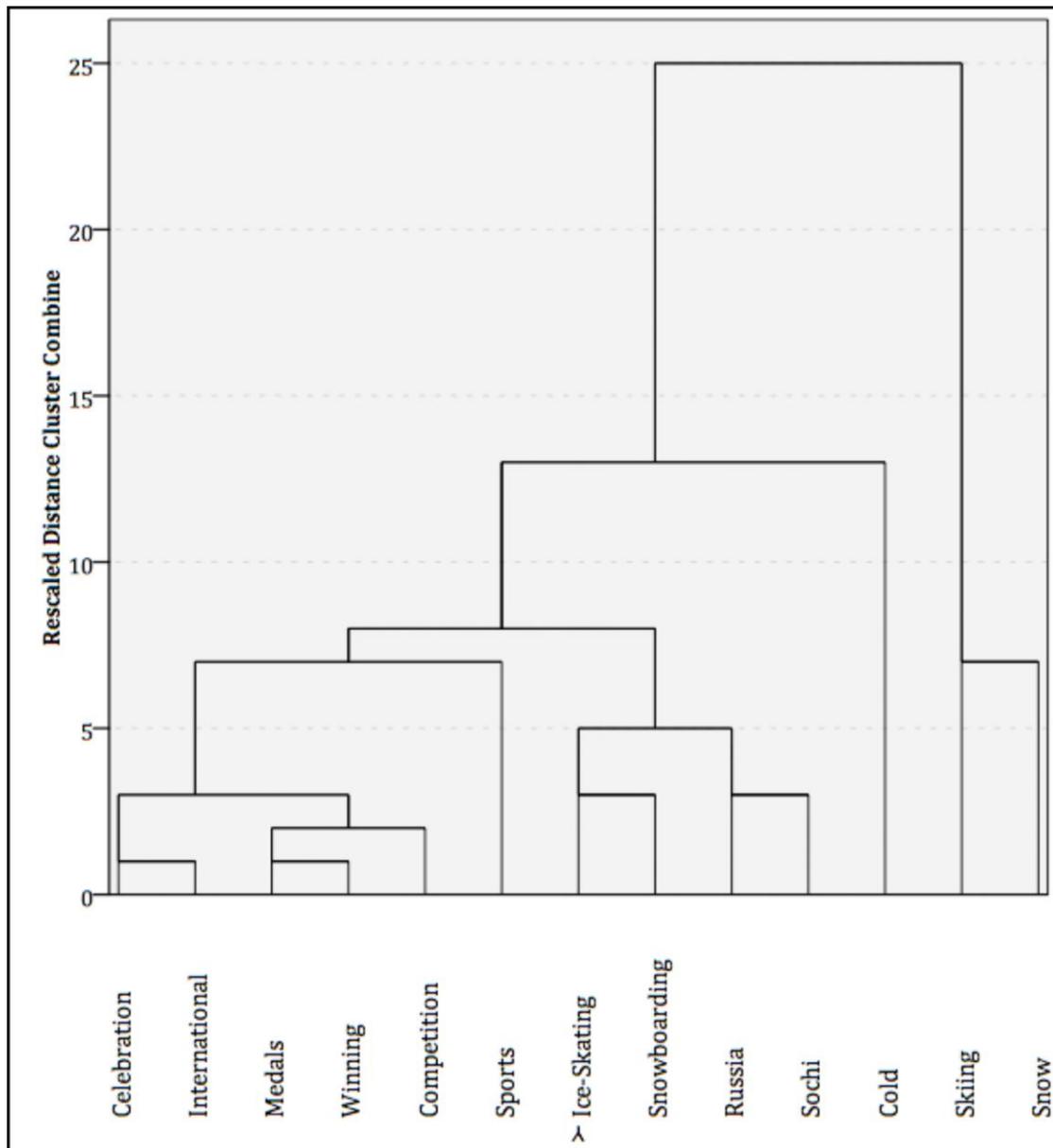
**Table 4.** Word-associations mentioning rates.

Further following the logic of Bodet and Lacassagne (2012), a 15% cut-off threshold was applied, which means that only the words mentioned by more

than 15% of the respondents were kept for further analysis, leaving 13 words for “Winter Olympic Games” and 9 for “Russia” (Table 4).

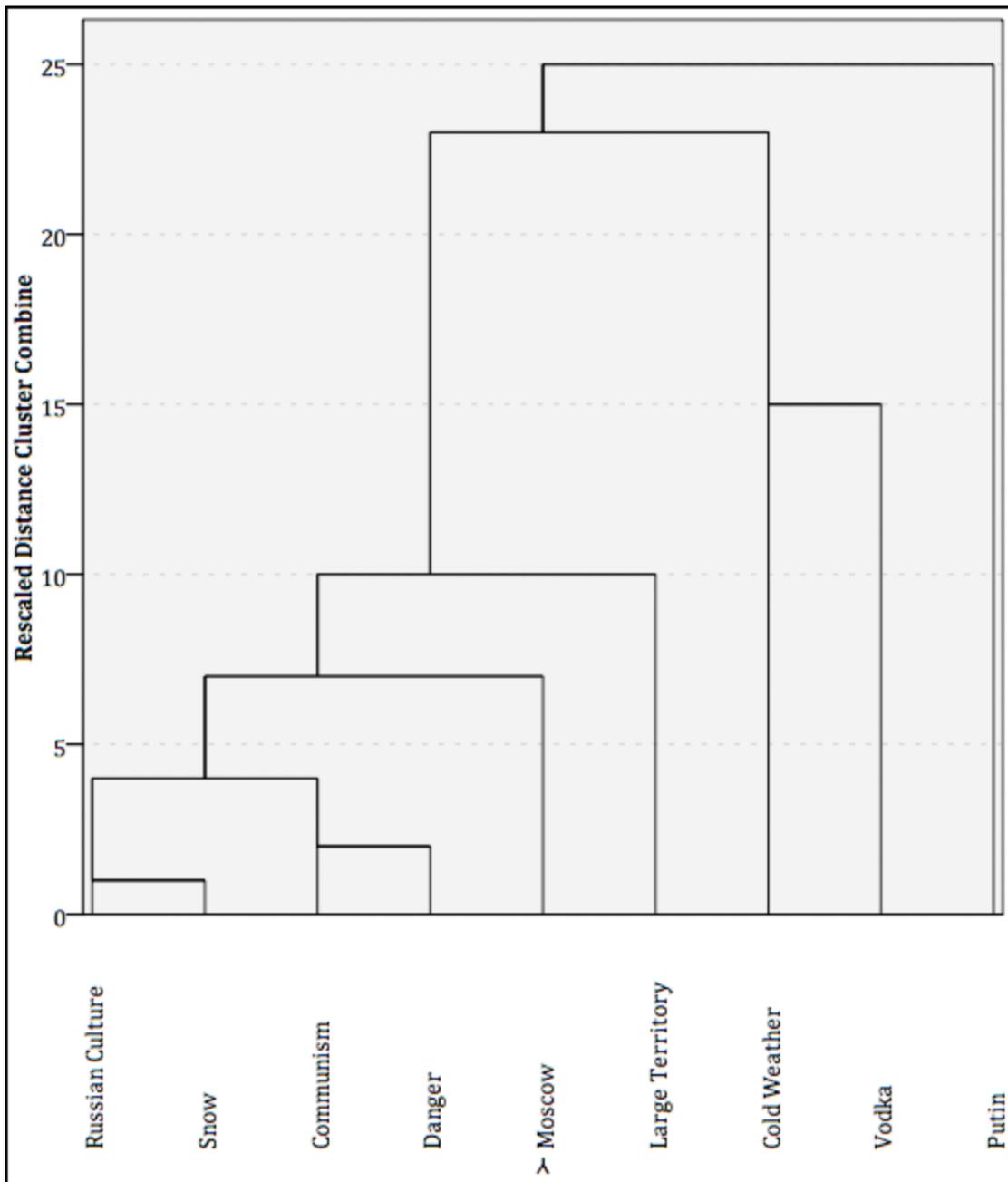
Based on the words ranking, two dendrograms were constructed using SPSS 22 software, employing Ward’s method and Euclidian distance as statistical tools for hierarchical cluster analysis, which is a further replication of the model study by Bodet and Lacassagne (2012). The dendrograms indicate ‘the links of proximity and then connections between the words composing the social representations. The shorter the distance on the graph is and the more connected the words are in respondents’ minds’ (ibid.: p.367).

As shown in Figure 4, social representation of Winter Olympic games is visualised by a rather complex structure of connections. ‘[T]he closest link, which characterises the closest psychological distance’ (Bodet and Lacassagne, 2012: p.367) is observed between two pairs of words: “Celebration” and “International”, and “Medals” and “Winning”, which, further joined by “Competition” and “Sports”, form the first sub-block. In its turn, it is joined by another sub-block made of two other very closely related pairs: “Ice-Skating” and “Snowboarding”, and “Russia” and “Sochi”, in the end forming the first major block, also including a rather distant single term “Cold”. This block is then associated to another one formed of “Skiing” and “Snow”.



**Figure 4.** Dendrogram for the Winter Olympic Games' social representation.

Figure 5 shows the structure of Russia's social representation, where two pairs are strongly related: "Russian Culture" and "Snow", and "Communism" and "Danger". Further joined by "Moscow" and "Large Territory", they form the first sub-block. "Cold Weather" and "Vodka" are two other related associations, which together with all previously mentioned items form the first major block. The second block consists of only one word "Putin".



**Figure 5.** Dendrogram for Russia's social representation.

## 5. Discussion

Overall, the first stage of the research confirmed that hosting the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia was indeed a partial attempt at nation branding. The Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics was staged not only to showcase athletic achievements, but also was used as a platform to project the image of a modern country, open to the rest of the world and capable of staging high-class worldwide events. However, one of the distinctive qualities of the Russian nation branding exercise is that it was performed against a whole set of controversies, outlined in the literature review. Answering the first research question, the study results ultimately suggest that presenting the image of Russia was actually a vital part of the Sochi 2014 international communication message, which if not defined all the daily operations of the corresponding departments and contractors, still influenced significantly the overall strategy and added a certain degree of responsibility and nervousness to the work of many. Arising debates on certain controversies, in turn, were either dealt with by the communication team of the Organising committee, if they were related directly to any of the event aspects, or redirected to the corresponding government structures, if they were beyond the committee's working framework.

However, it is important to note that we cannot speak of nation branding as the only (neither the main) purpose of staging the Games. The high quality of the event itself was the primary aim for its organisers. After all, even if considering the event as a communication platform, no messages can be securely delivered if the channel is not credible enough. Therefore, the event

organisers, backed by the government's support, exerted every effort to deliver a dazzling sport festival, aiming to exploit the once-in-a-lifetime communication opportunity to its fullest, despite the negative public perception formed by mass media. As a result, the event itself was a true success in the eyes of participants, officials, regular visitors and the press. What is more important, the results of the interviews suggest that the Sochi Games changed predetermined negative perceptions of many visitors and dispelled popular assumptions about possible boycotts and protests.

Notably, the social representation of Winter Olympic games (Figure 4) does not contain any negative associations, neither are they present among the words in a 10% - 15% retention range (Table 4). A good example to stress this point is the first sub-block (which can be called an international sports competition) made up of six strongly related positive words. At the same time, however, similarly to the Olympic Games' social representation by Bodet and Lacassagne (2012, p.368-369), no words constituting the main Olympic values are present in the structure (i.e., culture, education, solidarity, human dignity).

Another important fact is that two words "Sochi" and "Russia" are among the strongest pairs of associations in Winter Olympic Games' social representation, which suggests certain relation of both words to the public perception of the term in its current state. Therefore, considering the co-branding theory, we may suggest that there is at least a one-way influence of the Sochi Olympics (particularly, its host city and host country) on the social representation of a broader term "Winter Olympic Games". From a different

perspective, it is difficult to unambiguously conclude whether these two words were retained because of positive memories associated with this particular event or simply because the Sochi Games was the latest occurrence of Winter Olympics and recently was a hot topic in the media (especially, taking into account that more than 40% of the respondents did not follow the Sochi Olympics at all). Moreover, considering recent studies of the event's impact (see, for example, Müller, 2014), we cannot say either whether this influence is positive at all. Consider, for example, the cost of the event, 'the most expensive in history, [which] has made governments and their citizens wary of hosting the Games' in the future and reportedly led to a withdrawal of a promising Oslo's bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympics (Gibson, 2014).

Considering the opposite influence in the co-branding process, the theory suggests that we can also project the event's image on the host country's image. To discuss it, firstly the current social representation of Russia was studied aiming to answer the second research question about the current public perception of the country. Figure 5 shows that many of the associations are widely known and mostly negative stereotypes ("Cold Weather", "Communism", "Vodka", "Danger"), with even more negative associations in the 10% - 15% retention range ("Cold War", "Corruption", and others), as seen in Table 4. Notably, the term "Olympics" is mentioned by only 5.8% of the respondents, and looking at Table 4, "Sochi" is not present either, giving way to major Russian cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. "Putin" is a very strong stand-alone association in Russia's social representation, mentioned by almost half of the respondents.

Finally, the third research question aimed to study the influence of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics on the national image of Russia, namely the second half of the co-branding process between the event and the host country. The interviewees generally agreed that the event had a certain positive short-term impact on the nation brand, which had huge potential for further development, aiming for the success of London 2012. In the longer run, however, the current social representation of Russia, outlined above, shows no substantial evidence of the reverse image transfer. In other words, we cannot conclude that the Sochi 2014 Olympics significantly influenced the way in which Russia is perceived today.

Consider a few examples. Despite the argument in the literature review that the Sochi 2014 project was bound up with the Russian President personally, the connection of Putin with a more generic term “Winter Olympic Games” is almost absent (mentioned by 1,9% of the respondents), while it is very strong with “Russia”. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the word “Olympics” is hardly present in Russia’s social representation. Finally, the only common word in both social representations is “Snow”, which is hardly an outcome of an image transfer process.

Notably, from a broader perspective, the image of Russia has even been reportedly declining after the Olympics. Anholt-GBK Nation Brands Index (NBI) 2014 press release, for instance, states:

*‘In previous years, Russia had shown upward momentum - but in the 2014 NBI study, it stands out as the only nation out of 50 to suffer a precipitous drop. <...> Overall in this year’s study, Russia has slipped three places to 25<sup>th</sup>’ (GFK, 2014).*

The current research offers two possible though not mutually exclusive explanations of a negative trend in the international perception of Russia and a virtual absence of influence of the Sochi Olympics on it.

First of all, the project was largely supervised by the Russian government and the President personally. It was also almost entirely funded by public money. Of course, it secured the event's vital needs, but speaking of the relation of the event to nation branding, it leads us to an argument that such promotion activities were close to what Anholt termed as an ineffective state-led propaganda, which initially had very little potential to change public opinion (Anholt, 2010, cited in Alexeyeva, 2014). Therefore, covered by an alleged strong intervention of the government to what was being showcased to the outside world, the projected image could be actually different from the reality, making such branding virtually useless. On the contrary, however, this assumption has not been discussed or confirmed by any of the interviewees.

The second and arguably the most credible explanation is that the event impact has been largely overshadowed by the influence of many political events, which followed the Sochi Olympics literally without a break. At first, by the end of the Paralympics on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2014 there was a common feeling that

*'we were the best. <...> [W]e were really cool. And we were cool in a good way'* (Interviewee 2, 12 August 2015).

The unquestioned momentary success of the Sochi 2014 Organising committee was confirmed by all the interviewees. But a couple of months later, it could no longer confront the negative influence of a series of events,

which instantly became a prevailing theme in the media, and whose details are beyond the framework of the current paper.

*'We did our best to show the new Russia, the one without bears, vodka, ushanka fur hats, and so on, and in the end everything was back to square one'* (Interviewee 3, 12 August 2015).

Let us finally point out the fact that in the social representation of Russia "Vodka" is one of the strongest associations, "Fur hats" have almost achieved a 10% threshold, and "Ukraine", in its turn, exceeded it, which yet again suggest that the above argument is fairly plausible.

### **5.1. Limitations and future research suggestions**

Though the current research is qualitative in nature and therefore it did not aim to frame the objective truth, it has certain limitations, outlined below.

First of all, purposive sampling, used for the first stage of the research, despite having an advantage of deliberate selecting information-rich cases, has its shortcomings, which means 'that the researcher may inadvertently omit a vital characteristic on which to select the sample, or may be subconsciously biased in selecting the sample' (Gray, 2014: p.217). Therefore, one could argue that a different or an extended group of interviewees could have provided more information on the subject. Interviewee 1, for example, mentioned that experts in the Russian political environment would be the right people to help to explore the subject deeper.

Next, the second stage of the research resulted in surveying a limited sample of 104 individuals with rather uneven demographical characteristics, which

could have skewed the outcome. There is also a twofold issue with the number of provided free word-associations. Consider 46.2% and 42.3% of the respondents, which provided a full set of 10 required associations for the terms “Winter Olympic Games” and “Russia” respectively. One could argue that there is some potentially missing additional data, as their responses were limited by a maximum of only 10 words. At the same time, this might suggest that the rest of the respondents gave less associations as they did not think of the terms deeply enough, which leads to more missing data.

Finally, the current research can be further expanded. First of all, other cases can be selected to contribute to the field of nation branding through mega-events and Olympics in particular. For instance, Beijing has been awarded the 2022 Winter Games, which can be a good case for a longitudinal study, especially considering China’s relatively recent intentions to use the 2008 Olympics as a nation brand communication platform, which was discussed earlier. Russia, in its turn, will host the 2018 FIFA World Cup, which might become another case worth studying and comparing to the Sochi Olympics. Finally, the current case of the Sochi 2014 project can be more profoundly studied using different methodology approaches, including quantitative research methods. Finally, the current study can be replicated in the future to see the changes in social representations of the two terms in question.

## **6. Conclusion**

The aims of this paper were to discuss the theoretical framework of nation branding using mega events as a communication platform, and to study the case of nation branding of Russia through the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, using a two-stage qualitative methodological approach.

The literature review outlined the scholarly debate around the controversy and complexity of nation brands and nation branding as a process. Further, some cases of using the Olympic games for place promotion purposes were considered. The case of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics was studied in detail, focusing on the media pressure throughout the preparation period. It was argued that one of the main communication messages of the event, aimed at a global audience, was to project the image of a modern country, to promote positive changes, breaking certain long-established stereotypes about Russia. The notion was widely discussed in many previous academic papers, and was actually confirmed by the current study, grounding on the interviews with the people directly related to the Sochi 2014 communication strategy.

Then, social representations of Winter Olympic Games and Russia were studied through a public survey to explore the relation between the two terms, based on the principles of co-branding process, revealing that from today's perspective there is no significant influence of the Sochi Games on the perception of Russia among an international audience, despite the proved success of the event itself. Nevertheless, the successful event managed to overcome all the unfavourable predictions of protests and boycotts, and

ultimately, broke a predetermined negative public perception of the host country. Two possible reasons, both involving an undesired level of government intervention, were offered to explain why the impact, however, was not sustainable.

The main two implications of the current research paper for policy makers are as follows. First of all, let us follow the argument that state-led nation branding is often a pointless exercise, sometimes marginally different from a propaganda. Therefore, policy makers should primarily focus on what good national causes they actually take care of, rather than take every chance to impose any ungrounded perceptions of their work on an international audience. Secondly, no success becomes sustainable effortlessly. Thus to maintain a positive influence of a mega event on a nation brand, the communication message should be supported by every following opportunity, but not damaged instantly, as it happened in the case of the first Russian Winter Olympics, followed by the country's involvement in one of the world's major conflicts.

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