

Sportswashing is still highly effective despite more awareness among fans

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As the European football championships continue in Germany, new research has revealed that "sportswashing"—the practice of using sporting events or teams to improve a country's reputation—is still highly effective, despite increased awareness of the issue among fans.

Dr. Vitaly Kazakov of the School of Environment, Education and Development is currently undertaking a research project in Iceland, the nation with the same population as Stoke-on-Trent which surprised

everyone by beating England and reaching the semi-finals at Euro 2016. He has conducted in-depth interviews with a range of football stakeholders there including [fans](#), sport and international affairs journalists, sports club administrators and academics.

He has found that people are very keenly aware of the many problematic issues surrounding sporting events or which are revealed by the spotlight being shone upon host nations—for example, he found that the majority of people interviewed wouldn't really be aware of or care deeply about worker's rights in Qatar if the country had not hosted the 2022 World Cup.

Yet, because of the 'feel good factor' which surrounds sporting events like football tournaments, sporting events can still achieve the envisioned political goals of illiberal host states despite any negative publicity. Many Icelandic fans traveled to Russia for the first time because of their team's participation in the 2018 World Cup, and reported having good impressions of the country despite years of critical coverage relating to its aggressive foreign policy, LGBTQ+ rights and political persecution.

Fans reported feeling conflicted on how to feel about the events, and how to react to accusations of sportswashing. Fans and journalists are also keenly aware that it is not just the host states that are part of the problem—they also blame the organizers, for example, pointing to FIFA for enabling Russia's geopolitical actions because they awarded the 2018 World Cup to Moscow despite the annexation of Crimea just a few years previously.

In general, fans and journalists realize that sports events could be problematic at the same time as helping to expose some wider social, political, economic, [environmental problems](#) and inequalities. Even in Iceland itself, after the feel-good stories of the 2016 and 2018 tournaments, the sexual violence scandals associated with some of the

squad's players dampened the enthusiasm around their sporting achievements.

No notable Icelandic player was ultimately convicted, but the legacies of their successes in both tournaments in France and Russia are also placed into the new context of former heroes' reputations being significantly affected.

"Sportswashing is a catchy term, but it is not a new phenomenon—sport has been used for political and social goals for centuries. Fans and journalists are also aware that it is not just illiberal states that should be criticized for some issues because of sporting events. The current Euros in Germany, the upcoming Paris Olympics and the next World Cup in North America all bring up important political, social and [environmental concerns](#)," said Dr. Kazakov.

"More research is needed to examine both how [sporting events](#) impact people's understanding of and engagement with political issues. Ultimately, we need to be figuring out how to channel the power of sport in productive ways."

Provided by University of Manchester

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