

## The politics of the World Cup

By [Patrick Walker](#)

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Image: Sergei Karpukhin

It's over. Gareth Southgate's team couldn't quite do it in the end, but they return to the UK having given hope to a country that is, to say the least, struggling with its global image. Britain was not the only country that wanted to win big from this year's tournament: many states were after political victories. Croatia's 2-1 victory was crucial for the tiny state of four million, whilst France wants to use its World Cup final as an excuse to engage with Russian diplomats. Putin, however, has gained the most, despite his team losing to Croatia in the quarters.

The positives for England are self-evident. The state has finally found a source of national pride that doesn't offend anyone and for which Nigel Farage cannot somehow take credit. The English team's unexpected run offered welcome relief from chaos at home: Brexit negotiations, the Davis-Johnson resignations, and yet another Novichok poisoning. Their semifinal loss might have tempered the success with the typical sense of British disappointment, but it's irrefutable that the entire competition has been a net win for the British people. Constant political scandal takes its toll. An anonymous Yorfess poster put it best. 'The nation fell in love with its national team again. Football came home.'

Enter Croatia, for whom their place in the final represents more than just a sense of escapism. The former Soviet state celebrated its 26th anniversary of international recognition this year, and the country's football obsession topped that of the English leading up to Wednesday's game. 'Even small and outnumbered nations can become famous and big if they work together on achieving the goal' declared

Jutarnji list, one of the country's daily papers. Another lamented that Croatia would never be taken as seriously as Argentina or Brazil. In other words, footballing success is a welcome opportunity for the young country to prove the success of its independence to the world. Sporting triumph is a crucial indicator of the level of disposable wealth accrued by nation states, and success in the World Cup bodes well for Croatia's future.

France, on the other hand, looks to strengthen its existing relationships with hosts Russia. Macron and Putin don't often agree with each other, but RT reported that the two leaders have decided to meet on the day of the final. France was made conspicuous by its decision to not diplomatically boycott the World Cup in response to the Novichok poisoning. Macron prefers to see the World Cup as an opportunity to repair diplomatic ties with Russia, which have been tested as of late. The French President accused Putin of meddling in his election at the start of the year. Perhaps Macron simply wants options after the confusing NATO summit where Trump tweets on European defence spending once again sent mixed messages on his commitment to unity with Europe. Whether France's attempts to woo Putin on short notice are successful remain to be seen.

Even accounting for the summit that is yet to come, Russia's World Cup has already been an unmitigated PR success. Putin, in an interview on his country's appalling record on LGBT human rights reported 'no restrictions whatsoever' on homosexual couples in Russia. A law preventing the spread of 'homosexual propaganda' has been in place since 2013, and recorded hate crimes against the LGBT community have doubled in the last five years according to the Independent Centre for Social Research. LGBT activists have failed to achieve the spotlight they needed to highlight Russia's bigotry. In fact, the Russian government was able to use the publicity cover of the World Cup to sneak through unpopular legislation, most notably its raising of retirement age.

Russia has also seized the narrative on its alleged Novichok assassination. The Kremlin's international tactics to 'divert and confuse' have worked. Whilst Theresa May was citing over twenty different arguments made by Russia to refute the Novichok poisoning, Sweden was pulling back on its diplomatic boycott to buy its leaders tickets to the semifinals (for all the good that did them.) Russia has made the world forget its international meddling and domestic tyranny in favour of stirring narratives of national achievement, and of course, the mandatory photo op of Putin kicking a football around. This success bodes well for 2022 hosts Qatar, for whom one FIFA official said Russia has set the bar 'very, very high'. For dictatorships that want a warmer, more cuddly global image, the prescription is simple: hold a World Cup. Qatar might have made homosexuality illegal under Sharia law, but once European teams starts winning, their diplomatic enemies will be too elated to care.



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