Politics, sport mega events and grassroots mobilization. Anticipated triumph and unexpected failure of political elite in Poland

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Abstract

Sport mega events are the most prominent manifestations of the multidimensional and global interrelation between sport and politics. The purpose of the paper is to present the contrasting cases of two Polish SMEs: UEFA European Championships in football (Euro, 2012) and the bid for Winter Olympic Games Cracow 2022. This article pays special attention to the role of Polish political elite in promoting both events and to the grassroots movement that effectively ended the bidding for the latter event. It also discusses how the allegedly successful Euro 2012 tournament was presented in the public discourse in order to avoid conflicts and debates about the very idea of hosting the games. This proved unsuccessful in the latter case. This case deserves scrutiny as it is an unusual example of effective bottom up mobilization of civil society against the whole political elite.

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1. Introduction. Sport mega events and politics

‘Sport is the continuation of politics by other means’. This catchy paraphrase of the quote by Carl von Clausewitz was offered by Xin Xu, who analyzed the impact of the Olympic Games held in Beijing for Chinese internal and foreign policy and politics (Xu, 2006: 91). Sport mega events (SME) are probably the most prominent contemporary manifestations of the multidimensional and global interrelation between sport and politics. SME are ‘discontinuous,’ that is, exceptional and out-of-the-ordinary events on a global scale, attracting extensive media coverage and massive attention among the general public (Roche, 2000; Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006; Whitson and Horne, 2006; Horne, 2007; Rojek, 2014, Brannagan and Giuliani, 2015 and Giuliani and Klausen, 2011; Grix and Houlihan, 2014). SME are expected to significantly influence the host cities, regions and countries; therefore they attract the attention of political elites and become crucial topics in political debates and election campaigns. The elites are usually allured to the idea of hosting them by the numerous promises concerning the legacy of the tournament, which include international prestige, growing recognition of the host country’s brand, increased revenues from tourism, urban regeneration, and infrastructural investments. Even if contemporary politics is often presented using the terms of economic discourse of rationality, there are some fields where purely technocratic decision-making is overshadowed by the discourse of emotions. For although there is an impressive body of literature pointing out the lack of empirical evidence to confirm the economic benefits for the hosts of SME, nonetheless the political elites in many countries still attempt to present hosting an SME as an unprecedented opportunity for their development and...
progress. This was shown by the meta-analysis of previous studies conducted by Baade and Matheson (2016) and Flyvbjerg et al. (2016). Crucial articles in the field were presented by Maennig and Zimbalist eds. (2012); and the opus magnum was written by one of the most prominent scholars in the field of economics of SME, Zimbalist (2015).

These promises are eagerly used by the political elites to attract voters by including an SME strategy in their parties’ campaigns. Drawing on Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power, Grix and Lee (2013), both of Manchester Metropolitan University, claim that hosting SMEs belongs to the repertoire of strategies used for the purpose of public diplomacy. It supposedly confirms that the host country shares the universal values associated with the Olympic spirit, while at the same time it is an opportunity to showcase the country’s agency and position, enhancing its international prestige. Hence the hosting of an SME sometimes becomes a core strategy for attracting international attention and the branding of a country. This was for instance the case of the Republic of South Africa, where the 1995 Rugby World Cup and the 1996 African Cup of Nations in football were both sport and political successes for the newly re-united, post-apartheid state. Consequently, the government pursued intensive actions to host larger-scale sports events. Unsuccessful bids to host the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Cape Town and the 2006 FIFA World Cup in football were followed up by a winning bid to organize the FIFA World Cup in 2010, which became the first tournament of this scale organized in the African continent (Black, 2007; Alegi, 2008; Cornelissen and Swart, 2006; Cornelissen, 2012; full bibliography in: Grix and Lee, 2013).

Bent Flyvbjerg, a leading global specialist in megaprojects management from Oxford University, who studied the approach of political elites to megaprojects (including SME), demonstrates the various ways by which politicians ‘use and misuse’ events of this kind. He points out the ‘political sublime’.

... which here is understood to be the rapture politicians get from building monuments to themselves and for their causes. Megaprojects are manifest, garner attention, and lend an air of pro-activeness to their promoters; moreover, they are media magnets, which appeal to politicians who seem to enjoy few things better than the visibility they get from starting megaprojects, except, perhaps, the ceremonious ribbon-cutting during the opening of one in the company of royals or presidents, who are likely to be present, lured by the unique monumentality and historical import of many megaprojects. This is the type of public exposure that helps get politicians re-elected: so, therefore, they actively seek it out (2014: 8).

This holds true particularly for the non-democratic, semi-democratic or emerging states, where democratic control over the ruling elite is questionable and economic interests are sometimes tanged in an unclear fashion with state spending on tournament-driven investments and with the businesses of those private entrepreneurs involved in the megaproject. In his elaborations on Russia’s bid to host the Sochi Winter Olympic Games 2014 and FIFA World Cup 2018, Müller (2011, 2014) used the term ‘state dirigisme’ to underline the salient role of the national state as the main sponsor and proponent of the event having the full control over the finances ad decides who is entitled to take part in investments and effectively revenues related to the preparations for SME.

It seems that the case of the Euro 2012 in Poland could be described in the same terms as many other SME hosted by emerging powers or states coming through socio-economic transformation. These states have been among those most interested in hosting SME in recent years, seeking to confirm their growing international status, to showcase their economic capabilities, enhance their self-esteem and their citizens’ national pride via discursive practices which present the hosting of a SME as confirmation that they are “a nation to be reckoned with”, to use a quote from Alegi (2008, 397; Alekseyeva, 2014; Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2014; Persson and Peterson, 2014; Sánchez and Broudehoux, 2013, Grix, 2013; Jennings, 2013).

The protests and political activism, which are thoroughly discussed by Boykoff (2017) and Kilcline (2017), as well as growth of academic scholarship in the field (Horne, 2017b), were in recent years largely aimed at the abuses of human rights during the preparations for the tournaments (forced evictions and displacements, exploitation of workers, silencing of civil rights organizations and political bodies capitalizing on these (political parties and governments). These relations are often transparent and frequently exempted from the criticism due to the alleged “apolitical” nature of sport and sport-related enterprises. This underlying tendency of what Harvey et al. (2014: 2) called apolitical ideology, allowed, at least discursively, to frame growing financialization, commercialization and mediatization of contemporary sport which accelerated commodification of all sport-related experiences as natural processes. Both activist and research efforts were aimed at exposing the hypocrisy hidden behind the façade of idealistic phraseology and rhetoric, in particular those surrounding the Olympic Games (Boykoff, 2017b; Lenskyj, 2017). Boykoff (2017b: 64) calls contemporary Olympics an emanation of neoliberal capitalism. He also elaborated the concept of “celebration capitalism” drawing on Naomi Klein’s “disaster capitalism” (Boykoff, 2013; Klein, 2007). When Klein has shown how “disaster capitalism” allowed exploitation of disasters for an economic gain, Boykoff attempted to show how “celebration capitalism” complements disaster capitalism in finding new ways to drain public resources and capitalize on mass media fuelled political-economic sport spectacles and their alleged feel-good factors. All protests against the abuses connected to the SME and against the idea of hosting them may be thus framed as a part of an anti-capitalist agenda. The theoretical basis for this criticism may be drawn from the classical works of the Frankfurt School, as already in Dialectics of Enlightenment (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002 [1947]) sport was presented as part of the culture industry, sort of new opiate for masses. In reference to this classical Marxian metaphor, prominent Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton (2010) decades later labelled football, an emblem of hyper-commodified of sports a “crack cocaine of the people” and a “good friend of capitalism” which encapsulated this stream of criticism towards contemporary sport (Perelman, 2012).
The scholarship into the failed bids for hosting SME (Kassens-Noor, Layermann (2017), there is a significant body of research endeavours which concerns civic protests accompanying preparations to the tournament.

In recent years we have witnessed a growing the number of cases where SME were awarded to this kind of states/cities where the civil protests could be easily ignored or forcibly suppressed (Horne, 2015: 469; Harvey et al., 2015; Makarchyk and Yatsyk, 2016; Arnold, 2016; Müller and Pickles, 2015). The trend to host mega events in the cities in the East and Global South is partially driven by the corporations associated with the global sport organizations (IOC, FIFA UEFA) and the drive to approach new, relatively unpenetrated and expanding markets, but it cannot be overlooked that the negotiations and deals done in not fully transparent manner are far easier to maintain in countries which do not embrace democratic rules.

The purpose of the paper is to present the contrasting cases of two Polish SME: Euro 2012 and Cracow 2022 paying special attention to the relation between the political elite in Poland, the proponents and major promoters of both events and the civic society understood in this context as the protest movements. Both Winter Olympic Games and Euro tournaments fall into the category of second order or second tier sport mega events whereas the first order consists exclusively of Summer Olympic Games and FIFA Men’s Football World Cup (Horne, 2015, pp 467–468). This paper continues and builds on previous research into the topic of Euro (2012) and its political significance in Poland (Woźniak, 2015, 2013).

The latter will remain an unfulfilled promise of the Polish political elite as it was blocked by the grassroots mobilization of citizens from the city of Cracow. The differences and specificities of each of these cases are discussed here in context of the growing recognition of the doubtful benefits from SME among the independent media and general public. The grassroots protests which effectively blocked the submission of the bid to host the games were rare and not subjected to research scrutiny. In the final part of the paper this case is discussed within the wider context of the debates concerning Polish specificity of social movements, particularly urban social movements and the trend to organize SME in not fully democratic countries where the civil protests are easy to neglect.

2. Euro 2012 as the success of the political elite in Poland

The UEFA European Football Championships (hereinafter ‘Euro’) are organized every four years. Although restricted to participants from one continent, the tournament is a global event in terms of its scope and media coverage and is perceived as the third largest SME, after the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup tournaments (Klauser, 2011: 4; Gratton et al., 2006: 41). Euro 2012, co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine, was by far the largest SME organized in these two countries, which for nearly half of the 20th century were on the eastern side of the ‘iron curtain’, and since the beginning of the 1990s had undergone political and economic. The Ukrainian context of hosting Euro 2012, however fascinating lies beyond the scope of this paper.

It should come as no surprise that the Polish political elite was attracted to the idea of hosting an SME in Poland. The concept of jointly hosting the Euro 2012 was first formulated in the spring of 2003 by Ukrainian oligarch, Chairman of the Ukrainian Football Association and influential figure in UEFA, Hryhorij Surkis. In autumn of that year an agreement was signed by the Ukrainian and Polish Football Associations to cooperate to bring the Euro 2012 to Eastern Europe, and the resulting bid was submitted in 2005. On 12 July 2007 eight of the twelve members of the Executive Committee of UEFA voted, during the second phase of the procedure, in favour of the Polish-Ukrainian candidacy over the bid of Italy. The final result came as a surprise to many, as Italy was widely perceived as the favourite. Notwithstanding its powerful position on the global football scene, good sports infrastructure, and experience in hosting SME, it had lost to two countries that had never organized an event of such magnitude and did not have a sport potential or infrastructure comparable to that of Italy. Among the reasons which underlay the decision, the desire to expand the presence of UEFA and its sponsors onto the large and relatively unpenetrated markets in Poland and Ukraine (with a total population of approximately 85 million people) was mentioned most frequently, together with behind the scenes diplomacy of Hryhorij Surkis (Cope, 2015: 170). Match-fixing scandals in Italian football may have additionally weakened its position. Although the large corruption scandal in Polish football was also revealed already in 2005 (and subsequently turned out to be unprecedented in scale), it did not influence the decision in case of Polish-Ukrainian bid (Woźniak, 2018).

Even though the bid was for a time-specific event, its overarching consequences in Poland began well before the first game was played. Euro 2012 was presented in the public discourse as unprecedented opportunity for a ‘civilizational leap’ and the modernization of Poland, particularly in the reference to transport and sport infrastructure. It was also treated as a clear promise of Poland’s international reputation, and as proof of its successful post-communist transformation. The years 2005–2012 were marked by a massive inflow of money from EU structural funds, which were partially channelled to finance Euro 2012-related investments. Not surprisingly, the acceleration of investments and growth in spending on roads and other infrastructure was unequivocally perceived positively.

Poland’s two largest political parties, Law and Justice and Civic Platform, have been heavily conflicted since the year 2005. The conflict was further fuelled by the crash of the Polish presidential plane in Smolensk in 2010. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice and twin brother of the late president Lech Kaczyński, blames Donald Tusk for the disaster (due to negligence or even treason). Despite this animosity, the issue of Euro (2012) was exempted from political conflict. The ruling party was sometimes criticized for the quality of investments or slow pace of developments, but the very idea of hosting the SME or the special treatment granted to UEFA remained unquestioned by the two major political parties. In the case of Euro (2012), all the major Polish political parties were involved in the process of submitting the proposal and ensuring political guarantees (under the rule of the Democratic Left Alliance and President Aleksander Kwaśniewski), in the preparations for
hosting the tournament (under the rule of Law and Justice and President Lech Kaczyński), and in the final preparations and hosting of the event (under the aegis of Civic Platform and President Bronisław Komorowski). This seems to be a rather clear example of the ‘political sublime’ as defined by Flyvbjerg, with the parties from all sides of the political spectrum trying to take credit for the alleged success of the event, as they declared in their manifestos (Woźniak, 2015: 67).

This unique agreement among political circles allowed for the introduction of exceptional legal solutions to the hosting of Euro (2012). A special bill was submitted by the government on 3 September 2007, approved by the Parliament (Sejm) on 7 September 2007, and then quickly signed by the President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, on 19 September 2007. There were 412 votes in support of the legislation and just 2 abstentions, reflecting an unprecedented unanimity between the bitterly-conflicted political parties (Sejm.gov.pl, 2007). Polish politicians were unequivocally acquiescent in accepting the rules imposed by UEFA and its commercial partners. This substantially emasculated the ‘checks and balances’ principle supposed to provide for mutual supervision by all political powers. Even right-wing politicians voted in favour of the law, despite the fact that it limited Polish sovereignty in certain areas by granting an exceptional status to an uncontrolled external body. Poland’s surrender of some of its prerogatives, and the creation of special conditions for UEFA did not raise any public concerns. Wtoch points out that: ‘Surprisingly, in the case of Poland the legitimacy of UEFA demands has only once been questioned by the government—and unsuccessfully—in a matter of minor importance, that is, fiscal exemptions for UEFA’ (2012: 308). Thanks to this legislation, the main beneficiary of the event was not required to pay any share of its massive income as a tribute to the state, which covered all the costs of hosting the tournament. The Prime Minister justified this to the public by referring to the national interest and the ‘highest priority’ of the decision to host the tournament, without any reference to tax law or to the financial consequences of the decisions (Tetjak, 2012: 12).

In contrast to the oligarchic forms of capitalism prevailing in Ukraine and Russia, the investments in Poland were subjected to institutional control from independent national or EU-based bodies. However Euro 2012, defined as the motor for modernization, provided a useful excuse for actions which otherwise would have been impossible. The official report of one of the public bodies announced that the European supranational governance (in this case the European Investment Bank) had exempted Poland from the need to comply with legislation relating to environmental protection (Borowski, 2010: 47). The need to accelerate investments connected with Euro 2012 was used as an excuse to avoid meeting the standards of modern ecological sustainable development. The ‘state of emergency’ provided justification for many shortcuts of this kind. Another example concerns the secrecy of agreements signed between the Polish government and UEFA, demanded by the latter. The principle of transparency of contracts signed by public bodies was ignored, and the general public will never learn, for example, the amount of money paid by the Polish public broadcasting company TVP SA for the broadcasting rights to Euro 2012. The general director of TVP SA has admitted that even the massive revenues from advertising (estimated at 83 million Euro) and record-breaking audience figures were not sufficient to cover their costs (Polskie Radio, 2012b). This follows a pattern observed elsewhere: There are well-researched examples proving that the “state of emergency” leads to suspension of certain legal provisions, even those treated previously as priorities, referring to the security of citizens or the ecological consequences of public investments’ (Hall, 2006: 64).

Attempts to evaluate the costs of Euro (2012) and to define its real legacy have been rare and uncoordinated. Independent research of this kind is neither welcomed nor deemed particularly necessary. Flyvbjerg et al. (2003: 42–48) point out that promoters of large public expenditures, who present estimates ex ante, often mislead governments and the general public to get the necessary approval for their projects. The authors underscore that ex-ante studies are generally commissioned by the proponents of the events and that these persons are not interested in a thorough and independent ex post analysis, which could reveal their incompetence. Generally, the existing data confirms findings from the analysis of other SME (Kasimati, 2003; Hall, 2006; Matheson and Baade, 2004a, 2004b; Lee and Taylor, 2005; Zimbalist, 2015). The positive impact of Euro (2012) on the local/regional/national economies was overestimated, while the sports infrastructure now constitutes a heavy budgetary burden for the municipalities, which are exclusively responsible for its maintenance. The projected increase in the number of spectators at the newly built stadiums did not take place (Woźniak, 2013). Like in many previous cases, the tourism figures were also overestimated (Borzyszkowski, 2012; GUS, 2013: 2). Interestingly, some of the governmental bodies have used this fact to promote their own efforts. The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (2012) pointed out on its website that the number of tourists who visited the Polish capital city of Warsaw because of Euro (2012) was lower than the estimated figure of tourists who came to attend the events organized in 2010 during the celebrations in connection with the Year of Chopin (in a year 2010). With reference to the issues of security and surveillance, previous analyses (Giulianotti, Klauser, 2010, 2011) were confirmed in the case of Euro (2012) (Woźniak, 2015, 2013).

2.1. Media response and civic protests

One of the key constraints on regular democratic control of the Euro 2012 stems from the unusual alliance of media and politics, which was visible before, during, and after the event. During the preparations for the tournament, ‘country branding’ was treated as one of the major goals of Polish policy and public diplomacy, together with the issue of modernization of the country. Issues concerning the quality and/or necessity of investments were rarely raised, and both media and political scrutiny thereof was negligible. If any critical approach was present at all in the mainstream media before the Euro 2012, it was aimed more at the way preparations for the tournament were carried out.

The editor-in-chief of one of the leading Polish weekly magazines (interviewed by the Author in connection with another research project) admitted that shortly before the kick-off of Euro (2012) Prime Minister Donald Tusk organized a clandestine
meeting with the heads of forty of Poland’s largest mainstream media (radio stations, TV stations, tabloids, broadsheet newspapers, and weeklies). Asking for their support and forbearance, he referred to the importance of the event for the public image of the Polish state. His plea was met with understanding even from those representatives of journalism who regularly declared their independence from political pressure.

The opposition to the Euro 2012 was weak and largely absent in the public debate, the very few civil initiatives of this kind undertaken before Euro 2012 did not resonate well in the mainstream media. The most active opposition was formed in Poznań where anti-Euro 2012 Committee ‘Bread instead of Circuses’ was formed. Yet, these actions were rarely reported in the media, being labelled by mainstream media as a radical left-wing initiative with little popular support. (Leszczyński, 2012). As proven by on site ethnographic research, even though this was the most intense initiative protestiing mainly against the misuse of public resources, the scale was unimpressive with no more than one thousand protesters during a single rally. Local elite and media from Poznań and other host cities who believed in the tournament as a tool to improve its image described their actions as ridiculous which surely do not deserve polemics and could spoil the image of host cities in the eye of international public opinion (Buchowski and Kowalska, 2015; Kowalska, 2016).

Probably the most vocal protests against the tournament came from organized fans of Polish football clubs (mainly ultras), who were heavily conflicted with the government of the Civic Platform. Their opposition to Euro 2012 was visible at the terraces all over Poland and should be perceived both as a part of their anti-governmental agenda and as a part of the global ‘Against Modern Football’ resistance movement. This movement was not seriously reported in the media. In fact it was rather ridiculed and the mainstream press noted with delight that potential troublemakers would thereby exclude themselves from participation in the tournament (Burski, 2013; Gonida, 2013).

2.2. Allegedly successful legacy, really successful PR campaign

Following its completion, the Euro 2012 was presented as an unprecedented success during numerous press conferences. Some of the data used to confirm this success story raises serious doubts. For instance Gazeta Wyborcza, the main broadsheet newspaper and moulder of public opinion in Poland, published an article which claimed, in its lead: ‘Thanks to Euro 2012 the brand value of Poland increased by 75%, up to 472 billion PLN’ (Skwirowski, 2012). This was reportage from a conference during which an economist employed by the Polish Ministry of Sport and Tourism. In fact, the report of the Brand Finance (2012) is more modest in attributing Poland’s success to the Euro 2012 and underlines that the data was collected months before the kick off.

As has been pointed out by Flyvbjerg (2003, 2014), most of the reports evaluating the impact of SME are commissioned by those who promoted the event, therefore they cannot be perceived as independent research projects. This was also the case here. Soon after the tournament, the international consulting company Deloitte published a report praising the quality of management provided by the PL.2012 (2012). The report was commissioned by the very same entity which was supposed to be evaluated by the auditors. The official website of the Polish Ministry of Sport and Tourism, in a publication titled ‘The Polish effect - the success of Euro (2012) beyond expectations’, presents this report as an independent evaluation. Furthermore, the official body of the Polish government presents data from the ‘IMPACT’ report (ex-ante predictions of Euro, 2012 and its consequences) as the actual figures (Ministry of Sport and Tourism (2012), Cope (2012), Jaskuowski and Surmiak (2016), Jaskuowski and Majewski (2016), Kozak (2017) and Wioch (2016) presented an independent academic analysis of Euro (2012) legacy.

The publications commissioned by the government clearly serve PR functions and marketing purposes and cannot be considered as serious and in-depth analyses of the multidimensional legacy of Euro (2012). Nevertheless, they have proved efficient and resonated well among the general public. As shown by the polls, the majority of Poles believed in the success of the Euro 2012 and its positive impact on Polish affairs. The popular support for Euro 2012 before the tournament was at its highest in 2007, immediately after the decision of UEFA was announced, when two thirds of the respondents to a representative sample survey declared that they were ‘satisfied’ or ‘rather satisfied’ that Poland would be hosting the event. This decreased to the level of 44% just two months before the tournament’s kick-off. During the course of the tournament this share almost doubled. A year later, it had again dropped substantially, by approximately 20 percentage points (CBOS, 2013, 2).

3. Winter Olympic Games Cracow 2022 — surprising failure of the Polish political elite

Using the leverage of the allegedly successful Euro 2012, Polish politicians decided to pursue yet another SME. It should be noted that the idea to host the Winter Olympic Games in Poland was not a new one. Zakopane, Poland’s popular resort town in the Tatra Mountains, was a candidate city for the Winter Games 2006, but lost to Sion and Turin in a bid decided in 1999. The wish to make another attempt and submit a bid to host Winter Olympic Games 2022 in Cracow (jointly with Slovakia) was expressed in March 2010 by Polish President Lech Kaczyński (Piłat, 2012). Until the year 2012 however, the topic was not much discussed in the public sphere, perhaps because of the ongoing Euro 2012 preparations and also because President Kaczyński, along the many other prominent Polish politicians, died in a tragic plane crash just a month after making his statement. However, the political euphoria and almost unanimous media support associated with Euro 2012 reinvigorated the idea.

In October 2012, the municipal administration of Cracow, Poland’s second largest city, agreed with the Polish and Slovak Olympic Committees that in 2013 a joint bid by Cracow and Jasna would be submitted. An official Polish-Slovakian inter-
governmental committee was formed in September 2013, and the bid was confirmed in November (Kuraś, 2013). It was underscored that the Games in 2022 would be probably held in a European country. This promise was based on the unofficial rule that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) selects a different continent in rotation, and 2022 was deemed to be Europe’s turn to host the Games.

3.1. Political rapture once again

Again, the idea of hosting yet another SME received unanimous political support. On 10 May 2013, the Polish Parliament (Sejm) voted in favour of the idea, with 407 MPs voting in support, just two votes against, and three abstentions (Sejm.gov.pl, 2013). The representatives of all political parties, including those in opposition, supported the idea. Andrzej Gut-Mostowy, the MP of the ruling Civic Platform who was in charge of the bill, summarized its rationale (Małopolskaonline.pl, 2013).

Hosting the Euro 2012 was undoubtedly the ambition of the whole nation, as was its organizational success, resulting from the efforts of this and previous governments (…). It has been the only task that united Poles, who have been so much divided in recent years. We were aware that the image and the global status of our country is something important, perhaps strategic. Hosting the Winter Olympic Games ten years later will be perceived in the very same way, as the aspiration of this nation of 40 million people which is developing both socially and economically. Concerning the question whether we can afford it, one can ask: why do so many states struggle to host Olympic Games? Do they all simply like to spend money?

Jacek Majchrowski, the Mayor of Cracow, was the main proponent of the Games in Cracow. Majchrowski is a historian, lawyer, and Professor at Jagiellonian University, who was elected as Mayor in 2002, and has won elections three times consecutively. He was formerly a candidate of Democratic Left Alliance, but having gained wide support among the local voters he ran for the office as an independent candidate in 2010 and 2014. In 2010, he received the support of 59.55% of all voters in the first round, thus avoiding a runoff. Prime Minister Donald Tusk, together with the Minister of Sport and Tourism Andrzej Biernacki, were very vocal in supporting Cracow as a candidate to host Winter Olympic Games 2022. Jagna Marczulajtis, former Olympic snowboarder and an MP from the ruling Civic Platform party, was nominated as chairperson of the organising committee. Together with Majchrowski, she was the main ‘face’ of the campaign.

Support for the Games in Cracow was voiced by many public personas, celebrities and former athletes, including former Presidents Lech Wałęsa and Aleksander Kwaśniewski; Jerzy Buzek, former Prime Minister of Poland and who was at the time President of the European Parliament; Andrzej Wajda, famous movie director and Academy Award recipient; Adam Małysz, world-renowned ski jumper and the most popular sportsman of the past 25 years in Poland; and Justyna Kowalczyk, cross-country skier at that time the most recognized Polish sportswoman. Celebrity voices expressing doubt about the event were absent in this ‘debate’.

3.2. Public and media scepticism and civic mobilization

At the very same time however, according to the polls public support for the bid was dropping significantly. While the majority of the respondents were still in favour of the event, the number of those who believed that the Games would bring financial profit to the city decreased from almost half to 28.1% (Domaradzki, 2014). Despite the absence of any political opposition, this time the idea was not presented in the public discourse as an unquestionable opportunity for modernization of the country and — in contrast to the lead-up to the Euro 2012 — some intellectuals and scholars were vocal in the debate, casting doubt on the rationality of such a large expenditure for the Games.

In parallel to the political process paving the way for submission of the application, the opponents of the idea were organising themselves using the Internet as their main source of communication with the public. An informal group ‘Cracow Against the Games’ was formed on Facebook, and quickly gained significant support, with twenty thousand fans online and approximately eight thousand signatures under the petition to organize a referendum concerning the hosting of Cracow (2022). The label ‘Cracow Olympic Games’ and the expectations of large local and regional expenditures ignited the activity of other Cracow-based civic society organizations. While the Internet served as the first medium spreading the messages formulated by the movement, the arguments and ideas were very quickly ventured by the traditional and mainstream media.

Accordingly, particularly the local media from Cracow was conscientious and scrupulous in examining the decisions and actions in the process of bid preparation, highlighting mistakes and inaccuracies. Local public opinion became mobilised against the idea formulated and promoted by the elites, which had not been consulted by any civic organizations.

Doubts about the costs and profits of the Cracow 2022 increased when the clear contradictions between the two proponents of the event, namely the local authorities and the government, were voiced publicly. Mayor Majchrowski claimed in an interview that: ‘If there will be an Olympic Games whip, the roads, railroads and the airport will be renovated by the government’ (Lępczyński, 2014). The Polish Minister for Regional Development replied that the government would pursue only the previously-declared infrastructural investments, which will be realized regardless of the event. While Majchrowski accepted this policy, he also claimed that without the Winter Olympics, the governments’ guarantees could not be treated seriously. The term ‘whip for the government’ was widely discussed and criticized, even by proponents of the Games in Cracow. Some subsequent ill-considered statements by the local leader reinforced the opposition. When asked if the money spent on sport infrastructure might not be better invested in some daily services for Cracow’s citizens, he responded by again referring to the questionable economic stimulus: ‘I am irritated by all these pressures to spend on kindergartens and not on the Games. (…) Building kindergartens and nursing homes is not enough to sustain growth. These kindergartens need money
for maintenance.’ His failure to refer to the massive spending necessary to maintain hardly-used sports facilities did not go unnoticed (Piłat, 2014).

Contrary to the ‘debate’ about Euro 2012, where critical voices from the mainstream media were lacking, in this case Gazeta Wyborcza began to regularly publish articles quite critical of the idea of bidding. One of the leading columnists made a straightforward appeal to the inhabitants of Cracow to veto the Games in a column entitled: ‘Do not bring Sochi to Cracow! Call of the taxpayer’, claiming that (Orliński, 2014): “Because the stadiums and the games are like a huge oven for burning packets of banknotes, I am not surprised that the local authorities are so enthusiastic about it. Some of the packets will find their way to their relatives, acquaintances and spouses”. The growing opposition was strengthened when the details of the Cracow 2022 application were leaked to the press. They revealed numerous manipulations, particularly concerning the scale of pollution of the Cracow region and the ecological footprint (Olszewski, 2014). The smog in Cracow is proverbial and well-known to all inhabitants, and the pollution is far more serious than was stated in the report. The IOC was misinformed in many aspects, and inaccuracies in the application concerned even easily verified facts about the climate and snow conditions typical for this region of Poland.

Another scandal followed almost immediately. At the beginning of April 2014 a popular local news website published evidence that the Jagna Marczułajtis’s husband, who did not perform any official function in the organising committee, attempted to bribe the journalists of the portal to assure their support for the idea of hosting the Games. This was a serious blow to the whole campaign, forcing Marczułajtis to resign as chairperson of the organising committee (Salamon, 2014; Polskie Radio, 2014).

Cracow’s Games application was lodged on 22 March 2014. Only a week later, with the approval of Mayor Majchrowski, the City Council announced that Cracow inhabitants would decide in a referendum whether the Winter Olympic Games 2022 should be hosted in their city. The resolution announcing the referendum was criticized by the Prime Minister, who claimed that politicians should take full responsibility for this kind of decision. The voting was organized for the 25th of May, together with the 2014 European Parliamentary Elections. As Poland is one of the countries with the lowest turnout during these elections, it was doubtful whether 30% of eligible voters, which was the required minimum for the referendum to be binding, would cast their votes. The national turnout during these elections reached just 23.83%, but in Cracow it was 36%. The Winter Olympics were rejected by a majority of 69.72% of the voters (BIP, 2014). Accordingly, the local authorities agreed to withdraw the bid.

3.3. Specifics of the movement

The spectacular failure of the Cracow 2022 bid raises questions concerning the differences between the Euro 2012 and the lack of critical attention in the public debate leading up to it, and the completely different response in a course of the bidding process for the Winter Olympic Games. The final result of the failed bid for Cracow 2022 constituted an extraordinary success by a self-organizing movement opposed to the plans of the political elites. In a country with very weak social participation and low social trust (Czapiński and Panek, 2013), it represented a unique grassroots mobilization - with no institutional political allies - against mainstream politics.

Because this mobilization took place on a local scale it was easier to organize and maintain. While the hosting of Olympic Games is impossible without involvement of the central authorities, it is at the local level that a popular vote can decide the fate of the event. Control over the local authorities is easier to execute by a motivated and well-mobilised civil society. Social and political activists, helpless in confrontation with the large, budget-funded central political parties, concentrated their actions on the local level instead. It seems that this backlash came as a surprise to the proponents of the Cracow 2022, who seemed to expect the usual lack of public debate among the general public.

Kowalska (2016) has shown in her analysis of Poznań-based protests organized before the Euro 2012, how well the attempt to discredit critics of Euro (2012) worked. They were labelled as incompetent, irrational, uneducated and socialist and the fact that the majority of organizations and activists involved were coming from left-wing and anarchists circles was used as an additional arguments ridiculing them and dismissing their messages. The Cracow case proved different as the anti-games movement positioned themselves as representing middle class values of average Cracow-based taxpayers who should be well aware of the financial burden that could happen regardless of the official declarations. The grassroots movement was lead by Tomasz Leśniak, sociologist and PhD candidate at Poland’s oldest university, Jagiellonian, and included plenty of well-educated members who were fact checking the official narratives and presenting well-researched examples of spectacular economic failures caused by an SME. They were pointing for example, to the research conducted by Bent Flyvbjerg (2014) and Andrew Zimbalist (2015) and underlining the flaws of the ex-ante calculations made in advance of the tournaments by their very proponents.

Whereas the majority of Polish institutionalized NGOs rely to a large extent on either state funding or foreign assistance received from the international granting bodies (Chimiak, 2016),¹ the grassroots movements were mushrooming in Poland on a local level since, approximately, a year 2006. Works by Pluciński show that there is a clear revival or mobilization of urban social movements and growth of their significance particularly in large urban areas (2015, 2013). Since 2007/2008 they began to use self-referentially a label of “urban social movements” pointing at the tradition of the Western European movements of

¹ For a thorough and up to date analysis of the third sector in Poland see: Nańcz et al. (2015) and Karolewski (2016).
a similar kind which history has started already 4 decades before. While Kubicki (2016) claims that Polish urban social movements are mainly operating as agents of cultural change, Plucinski (2015: 410) shows that there is a remarkable pluralism and diversity concerning the range of topics and activities undertaken by urban social movements. Nevertheless, he also claims that the appropriate umbrella term defining the majority of their efforts is Lefebvrian slogan of “the right to the city”. The urban activism has emerged as a result of growing need of citizens to be engaged or at least consulted when their urban space/policy is planned, designed and implemented.

The grassroots mobilization against WOG Cracow 2022 was unique as the case of hosting global SME concerns the nationwide scale and requires engagement of the national political elite, but it was only on a local level of the city of Cracow where the event could be blocked by the popular vote in the referendum. The movement opposing the Olympics shared some of the characteristics typical for new social movements with largely de-institutionalized and loosely organized and networked structure of supporters (Buechler, 1999; McAdam, 1995). The message outlined in their actions attempting to convince the general public about the games combined arguments typical for new social movements (mainly ecological issues) and old social movements. The latter concerned in the first place the questions about the material aspect of hosting the games and the way state and city budget is redistributed. This aspect seemed crucial for attracting the attention of mainstream media and the middle class. One of the main messages claimed that the city should serve in the first place the needs of all its inhabitants whose interests should be put ahead of the needs of tourists and potential newcomers quickly infiltrated the debate.

3.4. Why the elite lost?

There are some non-mutually exclusive explanations why the elite did not get what they wanted this time.

The primary one concerns purely tactical mistake made by the Mayor Majchrowski, who clearly overestimated the public support, he personally enjoyed reflected in three electoral wins in a row. Under pressure of the local council, he decided to stage a referendum without any formal obligation to do so and against the will of the central government. This opened the door to a public discussion and a public decision, ultimately ending the whole campaign in the democratic decision undertaken in the referendum. This, however, has not weakened substantially the public support for Majchrowski himself. In late Autumn 2014, he secured his fourth term in the office winning with 58.77% of support, although this time it was in the second round election (in the first round he has received almost 40% of the votes). Nevertheless, the major opponents of the games did not capitalize politically the support and recognition they gained during the pre-referendum campaign. Tomasz Leśniak, the leader of the Committee “Cracow against the Games” in the same elections of 2014 received just 5.5% of votes. The Committee took part in the elections to the City Council gaining 6.73% which did not allow securing even a single seat in this assembly. Committee Cracow Against the Games was transformed into formal association named Wspólne Miasto (Common City) only in 2016 and continue to pursue activity in various local initiatives mainly in field of education, ecology, sustainable transportation and social affairs.

While the consensus among the political elite, the support of celebrities, and the ‘state dirigisme’ contributed to underestimating the impact of this bottom-up movement, and in the end it was a tactical mistake of the local authority that put the final nail in the coffin, the support for the WOG was also falling because of the following reasons.

Firstly, the referendum would not be organized if the topic of SME was not already widely and vividly discussed. Exactly then, the unprecedented cost overruns occurring in case of the Winter Games in Sochi (2014) were reported by all global mass-media, perhaps especially in Poland, where the Crimean conflict substantially fuelled public interest in Russian politics and policies. As the mass-media engaged in its particular scrutiny of the Sochi Winter Games, it was underlined as well that the significant cost overruns were observed in most of the previous SME. The previous examples of ‘white elephants’, turbulent and costly legacies from the SME hosted elsewhere did not stirred up the debates and the Polish political elites presented attitude that was described by John Horne, who follows Stanley Cohen’s concept of the “state of denial,” as denialism (Horne, 2018: 332–333; Cohen, 2001). Either in good faith or out of calculation they attempted to claim that “this time/in here it will be different”.

Secondly, the growing number of details concerning huge costs of maintenance of the sport infrastructure built for the Euro 2012 was now revealed to the general public and this data cannot be disregarded by the elites. These referred in the first instance to the expenditures from municipal budgets for the stadiums built in Gdańsk, Poznań and Wrocław, but also to the fact that the National Stadium in Warsaw. It became clear that the everyday maintenance of these will become a burden for the public finances for the years to come. The most symbolic and proverbial example discussed in the media was the Madonna concert at the National Stadium which had to be co-financed by the Ministry of Sport and Tourism to the tune of 1.5 million Euro bringing app. 1 million Euro of additional loses. This ran contrary to previous declarations that the hosting of the shows, fairs and concerts would allow for maintaining the stadium without additional spending of public money. It also became known that some of transport infrastructure constructed before Euro 2012 was producing losses, such as the train from the Central Station in Warsaw to the Chopin Airport with only 3% of passengers flying to/from Warsaw use this means of transport, and the train’s overall passenger capacity was only 4% used (Osowski, 2013). Constructing additional infrastructure for far less popular than football winter sports became in a public eye more and more doubtful investment.

Thirdly and finally, at the turn of 2013 and 2014 it became more apparent than ever that in the more developed European countries with better infrastructure and more favourable natural conditions for a winter event the general public was rarely allured by the idea. Mass media were reporting that citizens of prospective host cities were not eager to take part in
the bidding process, despite the declarations formulated previously by their political representatives. The results of the referendums in Bavaria (regarding Munich) and in Graubünden decided that German and Swiss applications would not be forthcoming. Sweden dropped its bid just two months after the submission of its application in the beginning of 2014. Joint bids by Austria/Italy, as well as Finland and another Nordic country, were also discussed but not submitted, due to the lack of both political support and financial guarantees. The Ukrainian Olympic Committee withdrew its candidacy in June 2014 due to the armed conflict in the Donbass region. While the candidacy of Oslo, Norway was supported in a September 2013 referendum by 55% of the citizens, in the following months opposition to the idea grew and public support declined. Already after the referendum in Cracow, the documents containing 7000 pages long demands of the IOC were leaked to the press and underwent public scrutiny causing nationwide outrage. The expectations, apart from the lavish luxuries for all formal del-

4. Final remarks

The existing body of research leaves little doubt that SME are elitist projects designed to benefit, in the first instance, the supranational bodies (FIFA, UEFA, IOC) and their business partners. Secondly, political profits can be gained by the promoters of the events, particularly if mass-media hails the success of the events and event-related investments. At the same time, SME are acclaimed and promoted as projects serving the whole nation and the society. When the lack of economic profits stemming from an SME is revealed, issues of national pride are called upon and the public image of the country is underscored.

Public relations and propaganda can convince the general public that the legacy of an SME might be valuable enough to accept the expenditures, but in most cases the decisions to host the event are rarely subjected to any kind of democratic approval. This was the case of the Euro 2012 in Poland. With the support of mass media and without serious objection from intellectual circles (Woźniak, 2015, 2013), such irreversible decisions are easy to make and politicians may feel a certain immunity and lack of control.

The success of this particular protest may be interpreted in line with Jasper’s understanding of social movements as moral protests, undertaken by ordinary people using extra-institutional means who wish a changes to occur or to oppose them (Jasper, 1997: 5). As shown in the introduction, most anti-SME protests may be described as opposition against the exploitation of contemporary capitalism. Although the Polish protest may be definitely framed as a grassroots mutiny of subalterns against the elite, the anti-capitalist narrative was here almost absent. Taking the international perspective, the success of the movement was just yet another case when hosting the games or bidding process was interrupted by the citizens executing their rights through direct or indirect democratic procedures (Kilcline, 2017: 1–2). Yet, in the Polish case it was surprising and exceptional, as political elites were usually very effective in imposing top-down and disregarding any protests. The movement itself was also unusual in its openly declared political nature. This was contrary to the dominating narratives in the discourse about civil society and its mobilization as “apolitical” processes. Jacobsson and Korolczuk (2019:1–2) wrote about NGO-ization of Polish civil society, pointing at its depolitization and dependency on the donations, usually from state resources, which may pacify the tendencies to undertake actions against the political elite. This fuelled the widely accepted thesis about lack of engagement and indifference or political “endemic apathy” of civil society in Poland which was at least partially put in question by the success of Polish anti-SME public protest (Jacobsson and Korolczuk, 2017).

In non-democratic states, such public protests can be ignored by the elites, and public opinions expressed in referenda or elections (if such take place at all) can be disregarded. Thus, more and more often the hosting of an SME is granted either to a non-democratic state (for example, China, Russia, Qatar, Azerbaijan) or to states where the governments are perceived as weak or corrupted (for example, Brazil, South Africa), where public control is limited and the events serve political purposes, along with increasing the income of oligarchic elite circles.

Particularly in the times of austerity, the allure of SME for the political elite does not have the same appeal it had in pre-crisis Europe. This could be exemplified by the fact that UEFA has decided that the European Championships in 2020 will be organized, for the first time ever, in thirteen host cities in several different countries. The official justification for this change - that it is designed to celebrate the anniversary of the tournament - sounds implausible when confronted with the lack of interest on the part of prospective hosts. In previous instances, rich democratic countries have attempted to use SME as a tool to realize precisely pre-defined goals, fitting them into long-term strategies, for example concerning the revitalization of some urban areas or redevelopment of infrastructure (the case of the Euro, 2016 in France, Olympic Games in London in 2012, and the Summer Olympic to be held in Tokyo in 2020). On 13 September 2017, the International Olympic Committee in an unprecedented manner announced the host cities (Paris and Los Angeles) for both forthcoming Summer Games in 2024 and 2028 Olympic. These two remained the sole candidate cities in the contest after all the other ones (Hamburg, Budapest, Rome) withdrawn their declarations of interest.

When discussing the future of SME, it seems crucial to take into account the state of democracy in a given country and the quality of independent media and civic and social control over the decisions of local and national governments. Poland’s case seems worthy of scrutiny. While Polish elites respected the formal procedures of democracy, in the course of transformation, they rarely attempted to discuss proposed plans and agendas with the general public, what resulted in the heavy dominance of one-sided visions of transformation policies. None of the large reforms implemented were subjected to a referendum. Two
sole cases of referenda with a serious impact on the contemporary history of Poland were the acceptance of the new Constitution in 1997 and that of accession to the EU in 2003, which were required by either Polish or European law. Direct democracy has been very rarely applied and then almost exclusively with regard to small local issues. In numerous instances the signatures collected by the proponents of staging referenda were neglected regardless of their number. It will be interesting to see whether the spectacular failure of Cracow (2022) bid will result in a growing consciousness of the political elites that popular support is indispensable for large scale projects, or rather in further attempts to effectively block any efforts to foster direct democracy in Poland.

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