

The Ice World Hockey Championship as a Tool for Propaganda

The 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship presented another opportunity for the government to influence its citizens in appreciating the stability that the country enjoys and believing in the choices the president has made over the years.

While Minsk was celebrating the 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship, the United States and Canada were preoccupied with the 2014 Stanley Cup. The United States and Canada sent their second tier teams to the tournament.

Their lackluster play and average overall performance gave the Belarusian government a chance to portray them as weaker nations athletically and as teams with less prowess in the international arena.

What the Tournaments Mean

The International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) organises the Ice Hockey World Championship and manages all international ice hockey tournaments. However, it has little control of the hockey in the United States and Canada. The National Hockey League (NHL), the most prominent and prestigious hockey organisation in these countries, hold the Stanley Cup.

As both championships take place during the same period of time, many of the best players from the United States and Canada simply do not participate in the Ice Hockey World Championship in Minsk. Unlike the Ice Hockey World Championship and the Stanley Cup tournaments, the Olympic Games represent a truly international tournament that attracts

all of the best players from all over the world.

Canada, a nine time Olympic gold medalist (including Sochi 2014), took only fifth place in the official IIHF final rankings. Similarly, the United States, the winner of the silver medals in the 2002 and the 2010 Winter Olympics, only managed to get sixth place. Russia's victory at the Ice Hockey World Championship after its Olympic failure, gave an opportunity for Minsk to improve the image of the Russian team and the region's overall hockey profile.

Manipulating People's Minds

Image correction is a great term to help understand how the Belarusian government has been manipulating the actions and attitudes of the Belarusian masses to mobilise potential adherents or demobilise potential antagonists to the regime. Assurances of economic stability and the skillful control of culture and media are crucial components of the image correction tool kit employed by Minsk.

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Government-controlled newspapers and television have been praising Lukashenka as a "man of the people" and refers to him as "father", a figure who looks after the well-being of his people and country. Presidential statements set goals for Belarusian society and manipulate what it perceives as shared values, interests and priorities of the masses. By propagating the Belarusian national idea via official discourse, the regime exercises a subtle, yet effective, form of power.

At the time of the 2014 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship that unfolded between 9 and 25 May, the government created a pristine picture of how well the event was organised, not to mention its importance.

However, this happened without providing any historical background on the differences between the International Ice Hockey Federation and National Hockey League, the latter of which is considered to be the premier hockey league in the world. This is, of course, no coincidence as Minsk does not provide any space for constructive dialogue or alternative perspectives from the international community to be raised inside of its borders.

After quickly imprisoning a dozen political activists, Belarus welcomed tourists from all over the world, thus creating an illusion of an open, warm nation devoid of serious societal problem. Every day the entertainment program in Minsk lasted until midnight, save the opening and closing ceremonies which lasted until 3 a.m. Many Belarusians were religiously watching hockey and gobbling up hockey related advertisements on TV.

People could follow the hockey games live on big screens in designated fan zones located next to the main arenas of the championship, the Minsk and Chizhovka arenas. Everyone could see the image of the bison, the official mascot of the championship, plastered all over the capital's public spaces.

During the official opening ceremony the president assured the audience that “everything has been done to make the world championship in Minsk striking, memorable and the best in the world”.

United States' Loss Portrayed à la Lukashenka

The poor performance of the United States at the [largest sports event](#) that Belarus has ever hosted was a welcome turn of events for the regime. To put it bluntly, it afforded the government a chance to contribute to the worsening of its image in the minds of the Belarusian public. It managed to portray the United States as a weaker team on the ice and, by extension, in the world in general.

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Their loss strengthened the public's perception of it as a foreign force trying to get involved in another countries' business. Minsk used the turmoil in neighbouring Ukraine as an example of potential problems that could unfold if western funding was allowed to have a hand in "assisting" democratic development in Belarus.

At the time of his visit to Smalyavitski region on 28 May 2014 Lukashenka asked the crowd: "Do you think the fighting in Ukraine is better than living in peace? Do you not understand"? He continued, "they are turning everything upside down there, and then this infection spread to us."

A handful of human rights organisations were virtually the only voices raised about the ongoing human rights violations and environment of harassment during the tournament. Primarily, they fought to draw attention to the imprisonment of various political activists for duration of the tournament in Minsk, a calculated move meant to silence the while the world was watching Belarus.

In taking an early exit after their success at the Olympic Games in Sochi in February, the weak showing by of the United States played into the hands of the Belarusian authorities who, used it to show that Belarus had made the right choice in siding with Russia.

Russia's victory, in its turn, presented it as a legitimately strong team, providing its people with an opportunity to feel proud of their national self-identification and, given their prowess, as the sole guarantor of stability in the region.

Even though Russia's victory did not play much of a role in the way of improving its image on the international arena after its involvement in Ukraine, it has worked well as a tool for effective propaganda for domestic consumption in Belarus.