

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Moving the Goalposts

A Comparative Case Study Analysis of The Belarusian Regime's Political Use of the 2014 and 2021 Ice Hockey World Championships

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Abstract:

Using a comparative case study analysis of the 2014 and 2021 IIHF World Championships, that are supplemented with a geopolitical code assessment, this thesis demonstrates that as of 2021, Belarus has entered a new pro-Russian stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations following the pro-Western stage that had been observable since 2014. However, given the lack of a geopolitical narrative in Belarusian politics, this thesis analyses how the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations can be seen via the politicisation of sport. As such, this thesis addresses the research question of 'how the Belarusian regime, led by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, has used sport for political ends?' This includes how the regime have used mega-events to promote its political agenda of forming international partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival, all while preserving Lukashenka's style of adaptive authoritarianism.

This thesis concludes that how the political agenda is carried out varies depending on the stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations in which the regime finds itself. Consequently, during a pro-Russian stage, the Belarusian regime will use sport to develop Eastern partnerships that will be dominant within Belarusian policy, promote a nation-building process that incorporates the Russkiy Mir concept, and ensures regime survival through suppression of the domestic opposition. However, during a pro-Western stage of relations, the Belarusian regime will use sport to construct dominating Western partnerships, a nation-building process centred on Rzeczpospolita, and assures regime survival through economic investments to strengthen public support.

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List of Abbreviations

BIHA – Belarus Ice Hockey Association

BIHF – Belarusian Ice Hockey Federation

BNOC – Belarus National Olympic Committee

EP – European Parliament

IIHF – International Ice Hockey Federation

IIHFWC – International Ice Hockey Federation World Championship

KHL – Kontinental Hockey League

LHF – Latvian Hockey Federation

WGI – Worldwide Governance Indicators

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1. Introduction

“Belarus hit the self-destruct button”. These were the words of the match commentator as the Belarusian national ice hockey team fell to an embarrassing 4-3 defeat to Great Britain at the 2021 IIHF World Championships in Riga (Potts, 2021). The game which took place in the Latvian capital was originally scheduled to be played in Minsk, the Belarusian capital, but following the political crisis in Belarus after a disputed Presidential election in 2020, the IIHF stripped Minsk of their co-hosting rights for the tournament. This is despite Minsk successfully hosting the 2014 IIHF World Championships seven years earlier when Belarus was also faced with a political crisis and geopolitical uncertainty. Still, on both occasions, there would be a spillover of Belarusian politics into the ice hockey arena as the Belarusian regime, led by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, would use the tournaments to promote its political agenda of forming international partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival. This politicisation of the 2014 and 2021 IIHF World Championships is the focal point of this thesis which, through a comparative case study analysis of the two different tournaments, will investigate the following core research question: how does the Belarusian regime, led by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, use sport for political ends?

The words of the commentator following the defeat to Great Britain in 2021 could also be used to describe the regime’s actions towards Belarus’ quickly deteriorating geopolitical relations with the West that have occurred since the election in 2020. However, it has been rare for political science to use such sporting references to help describe or understand political circumstances even though sport can provide politically malleable phenomena (Seippel et al, 2016: 440). Whilst there has been some valuable political science research on sport, particularly during the Cold War, political science has been considerably slower than other academic disciplines to engage seriously with sport (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2016: 20).

There is a wide range of opportunities to use sport in political science to enhance our knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of numerous aspects of society (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 21), with Whannel (1983: 27) emphasising that “sport offers a way of seeing the world”. This is particularly true when it comes to exploring shifting boundaries and shifting conceptualisations of the political as a distinct sphere (Kaal, 2021: 363). As a result, this thesis will use the politicisation of sport to help understand the shifting boundaries of Belarus' geopolitical relations between East and West, and the shifting conceptualisations within the Belarusian

regime's political agenda, all while attempting to encourage the acceleration of the study of sport and politics within political science.

1.1 Belarus between East and West

Belarusian politics has been largely defined by Lukashenka's promotion of a neo-Soviet society and political framework, in which neo-Sovietism can be defined as a Soviet style of decision making where Lukashenka nationalises elements of Soviet legacy that reappropriates Soviet symbols, such as the victory cult of the Second World War, promotes the othering of the West, and labels any domestic opposition as enemies of the nation (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021: 1-2). Resultingly, this has led to a range of misconceptions when it comes to people's understanding of Belarus' place in the world, with many being surprised to hear that Belarus has previously held strong diplomatic ties with the West. Although, such misconception may also be due to the lack of research on the country, highlighted by the small number of books in English available about Belarus (Rudling, 2015: 115).

Either way, for many people, Belarus is simply considered a permanent Russian puppet state (Liakhovich, 2014: 119), or even the heir to the Soviet Union (Lind, 2021: 4). Yet, as this thesis will demonstrate, Belarus has spent just as much time forging strong political ties with the EU and the West as it has with Russia and the East since obtaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and since Lukashenka came to office in 1994. This has included periods where Belarus-Russian relations have also “hit the self-destruct button”.

Belarus' changing relations with the East and the West can be best understood through a concept known as the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Under this cycle, Belarusian foreign policy does not follow a linear trajectory towards Russia, as many expect, but follows a cyclical pattern of phases of tensions and rapprochements, and phases of tensions and thaws, with its Russian neighbour (Nice, 2012: 6; Leukavets, 2021: 91). Consequently, when there are phases of tension and thaws between Belarus and Russia, Lukashenka will promote closer relations with the West to ensure safety and economic and political stability, as has been the case between 1994-2000, and 2014-2020 (Abadjian, 2020: 86). Here, the two differing stages of the cycle can be defined, and referred to, as pro-Russian and pro-Western.

The stage of the cycle that Belarus experiences, however, will impact how the Belarusian regime meets its political agenda including who they form international partnerships with, the

identity expressed during nation-building, and how Lukashenka ensures regime survival. But, with Lukashenka often stressing that he will not choose between East and West (Zoog, 2018: 1), and the lack of geopolitical discourse in Belarusian politics (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021: 1), it is often difficult to witness the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations in action, and difficult to witness how the political agenda varies between pro-Russian, and pro-Western stages.

However, it is precisely because of these difficulties that the study of sport can become relevant to political science. Sport, because of its politicisation, can assist us in providing answers to critical political concerns and exposing geopolitical phenomena such as the cyclical nature of Belarus-Russian relations. According to Nizhnikau and Alvari (2016: 79), sport has a specific role in Belarusian politics and can help us understand the motivations behind Lukashenka's actions and priorities. So, whilst Lukashenka refuses to commit to East or West through classical political spheres, such as parliament, he will do so via sport and sporting mega-events. Therefore, instead of using classical political discourse and events to assess the shifting political approach of the Belarusian regime, we might turn to sport.

As a result, using the selected case studies, with the support of four hypotheses that will later be established, this thesis will also investigate a secondary set of research questions, which are: how does the Belarusian regime use sport to promote its political agenda in terms of forming international partnerships? In terms of its nation-building efforts? In terms of securing regime survival? And finally, how does the Belarusian regime use its politicisation of sport to signify the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations?

1.2 Purpose and Importance

The title of this thesis is 'Moving the Goalposts' and this is based on the well-known metaphor of the same wording that means to change the rules, criteria, or processes to gain an advantage. This, I believe to also be a suitable description of how the Belarusian regime has changed its political use of sport to promote its changing political agenda and geopolitical relations.

Besides the purpose of investigating how sport can be used for political ends, the purpose of this thesis is to also demonstrate how the politicisation of sport can be viewed from an Eastern, rather than a Western, perspective. For the purposes of this thesis, "the West," or "Western," refers to the EU, the world's economic giants such as the United States and the United

Kingdom, and the politics of liberal democracy, whereas "the East," or "Eastern," refers to Russia and former Eastern bloc states throughout Eurasia, as well as the politics of neo-Sovietism and authoritarianism. These are consistent with Allison, White, and Light's (2005: 499) definitions of the "East" and "West" which are based on the discourse of Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

Another point is to demonstrate how geopolitical phenomena may be observed outside of a classical political sphere, and how sport can be viewed as an outside sphere in which politics can be presented. The aim here will be to demonstrate, through sport, how we may detect a transition in the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations from a pro-Western to a pro-Russian stage, or vice versa. This is significant because any changes will have an impact not only on the political agenda of the Belarusian regime but also on Belarusian society, including the daily lives and personal liberties of Belarusian citizens.

Similarly, the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, and whether Belarus promotes pro-Russian or pro-Western relations, will have serious consequences for the entire global order, owing to political stability across the post-Soviet region and a disjointed response towards the region from the West (Eck, 2021: 197). As a result, it is critical to stress how others might observe the stage of the cycle, as well as any signals of an impending geopolitical transition, despite the Belarusian regime's absence of geopolitical discourse. Finally, this thesis will provide a valuable addition to the study of both sport and Belarus within political science, allowing us to better comprehend both topics through filling a knowledge gap in these areas.

The thesis will now proceed as follows: section 2 will give the theoretical framework for the politicisation of sport, followed by section 3 which will present the theoretical framework for Belarusian politics, encompassing a historical background, political agenda, and geopolitical issues. Section 4 will present the hypotheses, research methodology, and data selection, before sections 5 and 6 present case studies for the IIHF World Championships in 2014 and 2021, respectively. Section 7 will provide analysis and present a geopolitical code assessment to demonstrate the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Section 8 will explore the future of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, the political nature of Lukashenka's regime, the future of the politicisation of sport, and lastly study limitations and future research potential, and section 9 offers conclusions.

2. The Politicisation of Sport

The politicisation of sport has resulted in sport becoming, among other things, an instrument of a government's domestic and international agenda (Senn, 1999: 205). Whilst many people believe that sport and politics should be kept apart, it is undeniable that the two separate disciplines now have a quickly growing dependency on each other. As Allison (1986: 12) concluded, "sport and politics impinge on one another". As such, those who believe that sport and politics do not mix, and should be kept separate at all costs, will have found the last few decades particularly troubling (Grix, 2015: 17), including many political scientists who have often avoided the topic of sport and politics (Arnaud & Riordan, 2013: 1).

Not all political scientists have avoided the topic, however, and there has been some valuable research on the politicisation of sport, of which much has been used to support this thesis. Yet, in Cha's (2009: 1582) estimation, for many political scientists, sport has been incredibly important to them personally, but not when it comes to academia; Cha (2008: 30) also argues that "sport does not occupy a week's lecture on the syllabus of most world politics classes at universities, and it barely receives mention in Western and Eastern course textbooks on international politics. This is surprising if Cha is correct since sport can offer an important opportunity for political science academics who are in search of a deeper understanding of numerous aspects of society (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 21). Or, as Whannel (1983: 27) stated, "sport offers a way of seeing the world".

2.1 Defining the Politicisation of Sport

In its most basic form, the politicisation of sport refers to the use of sport to affect political connections and activities, whether domestically or internationally, and diplomatically or socially. However, this does not explain how or why sport becomes politicised. As a result, for this thesis, I propose that, for now, the politicisation of sport be characterised as follows: Sport is politicised through communicative triggers outside of contemporary parliamentary and governmental settings and allows political actors and institutions to be drawn into sport to present their cases of how they wish to operate with other domestic actors or other international states when negotiating and providing support, or to cement an identity that can be portrayed through a sporting space to bolster regime support.

Many alternative approaches to explaining the politicisation of sport have been proposed, with George Orwell famously stating that sport was "war without the shooting" (Beck, 2005: 173). While some political and sports analysts may agree with this, due to the enormous scope that the politicisation of sport can cover, a good beginning point would be to divide and identify politics and sport as separate disciplines.

In line with Lasswell's (1936) famous acknowledgement of politics, Bairner, Kelly & Lee (2017: 20) conclude that politics can be described as a "series of activities through which it is decided, often by negotiation but frequently by force, who should get what, when and how". By what, when and how, it can be referred to what rights or outcomes are provided to the citizens, how they are provided, and where states operate with others both domestically and internationally. The result of such measures would be a focus on settling conflict, awarding incentives, or enacting punishments, which would be most notably delivered by certain institutions, but primarily the state.

Existing literature also provides a framework for how politics can be approached. The University of Bielefeld has conducted a wide-ranging research project where politics is considered as a "distinct field, function system or set of institutions" that has a specific approach to communication, in a set communicative space, that is distinguishable from others through "certain criteria, thematic focuses and reference points" (Kaal, 2021: 366). In this model, communication refers to actions within a space that are described as triggers. These triggers are effective actions occurring outside of parliament, party, and government. Or, as Hartley (1997: 182) would argue, "the major contemporary political issues...are all generated outside of the classic public sphere". By approaching politics as a communicative space, the model allows us to investigate how other actors, institutions and events are made political (Kaal, 2021: 379).

Sport can be defined as "a number of competitive activities which operate according to well-defined rules and involve physical effort albeit to varying degrees" (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 20). This is a basic definition of sport, but of course, a modern understanding of sport is more detailed and complex than this. Modern day sport is extended to include the organisation of sports clubs that compete in specifically built infrastructure, often at very high costs, and there are also greater levels of competitions, with greater prizes at stake, with many of these competitions acting as mega-events. But most of all, sport now includes a level of commercialisation where sponsorship and marketing are vital, meaning sport has gone from a

recreational activity to a business. But, where money and businesses are involved, the political environment will follow (Trenberth, 2013: 30).

Under these definitions, and returning to arguments made by Bairner, Kelly & Lee (2017: 20), it can be argued that sport can interact with any social organisation or institution and is part of the everyday existence of people throughout the world. The two concepts can easily accompany each other. Hence, why the politicisation of sport can occur, and hence why the politicisation of sport impacts the daily lives of up to billions of people (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 2).

This close interaction has ensured sporting participants, spaces, and organisations have been associated with changes in the construction of identities, nation-building and in the perception of trust and legitimacy a political leadership may hold. This has resulted in sport being used as an instrument in state policy programmes (Kaal, 2021: 379). As such, the politicisation of sport has previously been defined as the promotion of international and domestic agendas, the expression of power, developing peace, supporting nation-building, and showing independence and sovereignty through self-identity by using sport (Koch, 2013: 42-43).

Nick Piercey adds a contribution in the attempt to define the politicisation of sport when he discusses that the politicisation of sport is the moment when sports spaces become a highly politically charged location for shaping perceptions of the world, and becomes a contest over values, ideas, and perceptions (Piercey 2016: 69). Piercey also states that the politicisation of sport is another way to 'spread their discourses of values to wider society', but in this case, the political values are presented within sport, for example through investment in stadiums (Piercey, 2016: 70), which constitutes part of the more modern definition and understanding of sport. Thus, strengthening the acknowledgement that any definition of the politicisation of sport should consider sport as more than a means of organised physical activity, but should also concern aspects such as sporting infrastructure, mega-events, sports clubs and much more.

When Piercey says that the politicisation of sport is the formation of conceptions of the world, it indicates that any definition of the politicisation of sport should include domestic and international politics, as well as geopolitics. These worldviews involve the actions outlined in Koch's description, all of which can be classified as acts of domestic agenda setting, geopolitics, and wider international politics. As such, we can assume that the politicisation of sport can also be defined as presenting an international agenda through sport. Hence, why this thesis topic can consider large aspects of the political agenda, both domestic and international, of the Belarusian regime through an analysis of Belarusian hosted sporting mega-events.

Of course, sport has not just become political on geopolitical grounds, for example. Nor does the politicisation of sport only concern the more traditional, institutionalised forms of politics. Consequently, there is a much more exhaustive construction of the politicisation of sport that can involve the role of ordinary people in shaping the interaction between sports and politics, and the effects that the politicisation of sport has on individual citizens.

Lars Rensmann (2015: 123), explores how the impact of politics on the everyday culture of local sports can impact people's conceptions of citizenship, cultural and collect self-understanding and can also impact their political attitudes. Kaal (2021: 366) goes on to say that sport is now playing a significant role in constructing power relations in society because the politicisation of sport has resulted in the development of a politically charged and contested sporting space. Consequently, the politicisation of sport can contribute to the construction of identities, as well as the circulation of cultural and political values among citizens.

It is also worth noting at this stage how the politicisation of sport is operationalised so that we can gain insights into the political values, and motives, that have been enforced into sport (Kaal, 2021: 376). This politicisation of sport can be tracked by analysing the language of politics and its communicative practices and performances within sport (Steinmetz & Haupt, 2013: 25). As a result, this thesis will examine the Belarusian regime's political discourse on sport before evaluating the regime's activities in relation to the mega-events of the Ice Hockey World Championships, which are also an example of communicative practice and performance.

However, current research contains an important limitation and a consequent opportunity, regarding a Western vs Eastern context. Whilst my research will focus upon an Eastern European state, and a post-Soviet sphere of influence, unfortunately, existing research on these current concepts related to the politicisation of sport focuses on a Western perspective, which often comes from alternative fields to political science. As such the definition of the politicisation of sport has been constructed with a strong Western viewpoint. Existing literature also states that this occurs, with Kaal's (2021) research showing there is a strong focus on a Western context in the overview of politicisation of sports that are more specifically suited to Western Europe and does not consider the impacts of differing historical understandings, or societal structures, that are visible in post-Soviet states and their sporting models which I will later discuss further. Nevertheless, this does not mean that existing research and literature should be disregarded.

Due to the existing Western focus, Kaal (2021: 368) refers to arguments made by De Waele et al (2018) and says that our understanding of the politicisation of sport could highly benefit from research that explores regimes from other regions, as this would help us to “better establish the varying impact of specific sport and political cultures on the politicisation of sport, and to gain an insight in the interplay between global sport events, global institutions and movements and an emerging global public sphere”. Further exploration of the politicisation of sport will hopefully help reveal the different models for the post-Soviet sphere of influence that shapes the politicisation of sport, aimed at alternative societies, such as a homo-post Sovieticus (see Greene, 2019: 181), with the analysis of the Belarusian use of the IIHFWCs being able to provide a post-Soviet/Eastern block perspective of the politicisation of sport.

2.2 Sport in the Realm of International Politics

As sport has become increasingly international, and politics has adapted to a world of globalisation, the two have become even more closely associated. The political capabilities can, however, extend beyond governmental institutions and impacts the daily lives of billions of people, affecting how they think about, and live in, the world (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 2). International sport now comes with its own messages on how to behave, how to think, and how to interpret one’s place in the world, with Hassan (2018: 736) claiming that sporting arenas have become the only arena in which political messages can be conveyed. This has happened during Olympic Games, for instance, because these events provide an opportunity for people to flee and protest political repression in their home countries, as well as to travel to a new location and seek asylum (Rathbone, 2021: 2). This occurred in 1948, for example, when Marie Provaznikova, a Czechoslovakian gymnastics coach, sought asylum in London after using the games as a platform to protest communist Prague's lack of freedom (Rathbone, 2021: 2).

Sport can be a useful political and diplomatic tool when it comes to gaining prestige, protesting various situations, spreading propaganda, and recognising, or othering, another nation (Strenk, 1979: 128). Here, countries have begun to realise how powerful sport is and have set about exploiting sport for more than just sporting outcomes (Hassan, 2018: 743). The result of this realisation is that sporting competitions have transformed into contests of ideology, such as communism vs capitalism, or fascism vs liberal democracy (Arnaud & Riordan, 2013: 1). Because of this, sport developed a new role in the sphere of international politics and sport

could now be used to contest different political ideologies. For some, a sporting event cannot just be country 'A' vs country 'B', it would be a further focus of two competing ideologies.

Sport can be used in international politics in many conducts. For example, it can be used to help with nation-building with forms of policy advancement, or, to make political statements and positions. In the 19th century, during many nations' initial stages of state formation, gymnastic societies were used as political instruments for constructing a national identity (Arnaud & Riordan, 2013: 4). This can be extended to policy advancement as shown in France where sport was once promoted as a means of social discipline to regenerate French youth (Holt, 1981: 58) or to deal with social conflict in developing, urban cities (Poujol, 1993: 23).

Alternatively, sport can also be used less civilly to make political actions with an international focus. This can include a political crisis between two states being translated into international sports with propaganda at sporting events, the banning of, or boycotting of sporting events, or violence as a form of political protest in locations where sporting events are being held (Arnaud & Riordan, 2013: 11-12). Sport can be used as a platform for politics and can be used as an opportunity to make a statement in an entity that is globally witnessed.

Amongst these themes, however, there is a selection of variables that can be used to understand how sport is used in the realm of international politics. Such variables also allow us to witness, and measure, the political changes of a ruling regime or government through sport. These existing variables include power for change, sporting diplomacy, soft power, and nation-building.

Power for Change: Sport can act as a catalyst for change in international politics, both in a physical and political sense. Physically, sport can provide countries with the chance to host major events in cities that will then receive funding to be virtually rebuilt and refitted with modern, globalised infrastructure that will support the environment, transportation, tourism, and cultural facilities amongst others (Cha, 2009: 1595). Although, such rapid changes will not always result in widespread economic benefits (Andranovich et al, 2001: 119). Despite this, the lure of being a host for a major event becomes irresistible due to benefits such as increased public support.

Cha (2009: 1598) specifically explores the "less tactical and more ideational" pressure which can compel political change, particularly for illiberal regimes. The gap between the regime's aberrant practices and the values that sport carries will be highlighted, and the regime will be pressurised into adopting more values that are classically liberal (Cha, 2009: 1598). This

pressure will come from sporting institutions, spectators, and participants when such a regime wishes to participate or host an event. Illiberal regimes will often cave into the pressure because the cost of not doing so will impinge directly on their reputation, legitimacy, and stature (Cha, 2009: 1599).

As such, illiberal states are left in a Catch-22 situation when it comes to political change and sport. They can host and participate in sporting events to improve their prestige, domestic infrastructure, and public support, but in return, they must adjust illiberal practices if they are to receive international support and recognition (Cha, 2009: 1599). Sport can provide states with a chance for physical and domestic change, often at the cost of political and international change, but not always both. Consequently, how a state balances these changes, and which one they prioritise, can inform researchers a lot about a state's political agenda. Therefore, it is appropriate for political scientists to measure political changes because of the politicisation of sport in terms of domestic policy or foreign policy (Cha, 2009: 1597).

Sporting Diplomacy: Diplomacy is the conduct of relations between sovereign states in world politics, and sport is no different (Murray & Pigman, 2014: 1100). Udo Merkel sees sport as a foreign policy and diplomatic tool (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 2), with Cha (2009: 1592) consequently describing sport as a “symbolic, high profile, yet tactful tool for diplomatic statecraft”. Here sport is used to provide a stage for political and ideological rivalries, and to create, or remove, tension and conflict (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 2).

According to Cha (2009: 1592), sport matters for diplomacy in two ways. Firstly, sport can facilitate diplomatic progress in ways ordinary negotiations cannot. Particularly when you consider that establishing diplomatic relations is vital for emerging states, and with most emerging states being outside of the scope of many international diplomatic institutions, such as the G20, sporting events may be the only opportunity to create contact with much larger nations and increase the state's recognition and support.

Secondly, sport can be used as a form of sanction that sends high profile and symbolic messages of disapproval (Cha, 2009: 1592). This highlights a previous acknowledgement that some political messages can only be conveyed in a sporting arena. Through the sending of such messages, states will be able to use sporting diplomacy to position themselves within the realm of geopolitics and signal alliances with established political and economic orders.

Murray and Pigman (2014: 1101) recognise the trend of sporting diplomacy in international politics, stating that the practice is facilitated by traditional diplomacy and uses sportspeople

and sporting events to "engage, inform, and create a favourable imagine" in an attempt by a state to gain greater support, and more positive perceptions, of their foreign policy approaches. This is yet another indication that sport is being used to promote a country's ideals and values to build international partnerships.

For Murray & Pigman (2014: 1102-1103) sport can be used as a diplomatic tool in the following four beneficial approaches. Firstly, sport can encourage institutions to reform and adapt. Secondly, sport can engage people and break down existing prejudice – something governments are keen to tap into. Thirdly, hosting sporting mega-events provides significant diplomatic opportunities where a host can confirm that the nation is part of a positive international community and can provide a message to alter the perception of their foreign policy, and finally, sport can sublimate conflict by conducting a metaphorical battle around sport, rather than a physical conflict. In short, “sport is a means of international exchange short of open conflict” (Murray & Pigman, 2014: 1103).

Most of these uses have tremendous potential for emerging countries wishing to expand their international presence or modify their diplomatic agenda. Breaking down prejudice will help create a more unified society and identity, and an opportunity to alter their foreign policy perception may be key if they are looking for greater international recognition and support, or if they are looking to enter an established political order and position themselves with either the East or the West.

Soft Power: Sporting diplomacy can also be considered a soft power tool. Here, soft power can be defined as “a strategy aimed at improving a state’s international status through the power of attraction, rather than through military and economic force (Lenskyj, 2020: 40). Sport can translate into soft power for some countries and can be perceived as a tool with propagandist potential (Beck, 2005: 170). Soft power techniques include using sport to express a national identity, convey an image of modernity, create a positive perception of the state, and position themselves on a global stage (Cha, 2009: 1590). Sport provides the platform for states to display such identities, and for emerging states, it is also an opportunity to attract the international spotlight and introduce to the world who they are and what they represent.

Further, Cha (2009: 1591), (although using the Western case of Australia), provides evidence of how soft power through sport can be used to promote the model of a political order. For Australia, this was the model of liberal democratic values, but for some post-Soviet states, they may use sport to promote more Eastern leaning, or neo-Soviet, values. Whichever model is

promoted, sport and soft power are again being used to support the state through forming international partnerships, and geopolitical alliances in return for greater state recognition.

Nation Building: Soft power aligns with another use of sport in the realm of international politics. This is the process of nation-building which is an ongoing and contested process occurring through the creation of formal political, economic, and social institutions, but also through struggles in cultural and symbolic interests (Farquharson & Majoribanks, 2003: 39). But nation-building also incorporates the idea of identity, and this relates to the imagined community's argument presented by Anderson (2006: 6), which acknowledges that nation-building can also include communities and nations being re-imagined. Re-imagining identity through nation-building has been popular amongst post-Soviet authoritarian states as they may look to re-connect or disconnect, with their Soviet past. Resultingly, in many cases, these authoritarian regimes have taken a strong interest in promoting sport, particularly by employing the strategy of using sport in this nation-building process (Koch, 2013: 42).

On identity, Cha (2009: 1585) argues that sport can be a powerful symbol of nation-building since it promotes a sense of unity and identity in newly formed and emerging nations. Seippel et al (2016: 441) agree and explain that sport provides a platform for nation-building whereby a state can promote their national identity and the image it wants to portray to the rest of the world.

Identity can also be key when it comes to the assertion of national independence. Whilst states can use sport to increase political alliances and partnerships with other states, states can also use sport to express independence from states/political agendas when they feel under threat. As has been the case with many post-Soviet states in their attitude towards Russia. Cha (2009: 1589) explains this approach by stating that sport creates impulses for nations to view themselves as distinct and that throughout history sport has served as a channel for the expression of distinctive identity and political independence. Here, sport is often crucial to nation-building because, if a state feels threatened, it may be unable to promote its identity and express those approaches to nation-building through traditional political means. In response, sport provides this opportunity because competing and hosting sporting events allows for nation-building when thousands of spectators witness a nation's standards and identity (Cha, 2009: 1589).

In the end, all approaches of change through sport, sporting diplomacy, nation-building, and soft power have one overarching goal. That is regime survival for a state's ruling government.

The political shift strengthens international partnerships and promotes the formation of national identities. Both of which are required to increase a regime's support for it to survive. Black and Peacock (2011: 2281) confirm this by demonstrating that participation in sports, as well as the use of mega sporting events, is a political and developmental priority for developing countries to achieve the political goal of regime survival.

The interconnectedness of these aspects of sport in the realm of international politics means that when it comes to sport, political changes can be witnessed through sport, but this should be measured through domestic and/or foreign policy (Cha, 2009: 1597). For political scientists, this means that political agendas and political changes can be witnessed through a national approach within sport to existing variables such as diplomacy and international partnerships and nation-building, alongside my addition and assessment of regime survival due to the factors previously mentioned.

2.3 The Politicisation of Ice Hockey

Ice hockey is a sport that has been heavily politicised in the realm of international politics and is one of the first modern examples of how sport can be used for political confrontations, to represent political upheaval and nation-building. As such, former US national player, Dave Silk, once described the sport as something that for his team was a hockey game, but “to the rest of the world, it was a political statement” (Abelson, 2010: 65).

This statement was made following the first major politicisation of the sport with a game known as Miracle on Ice. This was the story of a sporting event turning into a political confrontation, but also an Olympic game for the gold medal between the Soviet Union and the USA in which the Americans won 4-3. The match turned into a battle of political ideologies of communism and capitalism, in a game the Americans had to win to demonstrate the capitalist political system was superior (Abelson, 2010: 90). It was the first example of how ice hockey can be politically used to promote ideological preferences and to signal a country's positioning towards either the capitalist West or the alternative East.

It has been no surprise that what has taken place in the hockey arena has also been catapulted into the political arena, and vice-versa (Abelson, 2010: 83). In many cases, years of history and political division are being settled over three periods on ice, rather than through conventional means (Abelson, 2010: 90). This is a trend that has long continued and therefore, it is also no

surprise that post-Soviet countries, which hold a neo-Soviet identity, have also been politicising ice hockey through techniques replicating the former Soviet Union, with the longstanding Belarusian regime leader, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, using ice hockey, and the hosting of mega-events as a diplomatic tool for balancing Belarus' unstable geopolitical position and imposing the regime's ideological preferences onto sporting achievements, or, in some cases, failures (Rodriguez-Diaz et al, 2020: 6).

A similar approach has also been seen through Russia's use of the KHL as a soft power tool, with the league once previously being described as "Putin's political project" (Vorotnikov & Ivanova, 2019: 120). Forsberg (2021: 206) explores how the KHL was initiated by the Russian President to boost Russia's self-image and international standing, to allow Russia to regain a 'great-power' identity, but also in the words of Putin, to "restore the united humanitarian space in the post-Soviet territory". This would imply that Putin is attempting to build a neo-Soviet society using an international hockey league as a serious Russian initiative to revitalise Soviet characteristics or partners and signal current Russian political ambitions (Backman & Carlsson, 2020: 517). For Russia, and some other post-Soviet states, ice hockey has become central to the political construction and reproduction of official nationalism (Fuks, 2013: 26).

Whilst ice hockey can be used for domestic purposes, the KHL has been used more so to allow Russia to balance its geopolitical position. In one sense, the league can create an image of Russia as a normal country with which fans from countries in the West can share a common culture (Forsberg, 2021: 207), but alternatively, the league can act as an opportunity for Russia to gain new partners and markets to bring into the Russian sphere of influence (Backman & Carlsson, 2020: 517-8). At the start of the most recent league season in 2021, aside from the 19 Russian teams, there was also a lone representation from Finland (Jokerit Helsinki), Latvia (Dinamo Riga), Belarus (Dinamo Minsk), Kazakhstan (Barys Nur-Sultan), and China (Kunlun Red Star). Apart from Jokerit and Dinamo Riga, the present league line-up implies that the KHL is being used to promote Russia's joint political and economic interests with the East (Backman & Carlsson, 2020: 516). However, this has not always been the case, since clubs from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, and Ukraine have previously competed in the KHL.

The KHL had held intensive negotiations with more European ice hockey associations in the early 2010s, including discussions with potential Swedish, German and British teams, and whilst these did not materialise, it suggested a strong desire amongst the KHL, and Russian

regime, to increase ties with the West (Forsberg, 2021: 209). This signals that participation in sport can also signal whether one state aligns with the interests of another, and whilst the KHL has been used as an attempt to increase Russia's Western relations, the use of the KHL and ice hockey can also be adapted to suit any change in Putin's political ambitions and strategies (Backman & Carlsson, 2020: 517).

Similarly, strained Russian relations with the West can also affect the league, as was the case following the Crimean Crisis in 2014 (Forsberg, 2021: 210). Whilst participants can indicate what the Russian regime's interests are, and whether they the states of non-Russian participants align with the nationalist construction of the Russian regime, the KHL can also be used by other states to signal their objective geopolitical relations with Russia and their Eastern partners. For example, HC Donbass, a Ukrainian club, withdrew from the league following the annexation of Crimea in protest of the Russian regime and as an indication of their desire to distance themselves from the "united space" Putin was determined to build. Similarly, when Jokerit played a KHL game against Spartak Moscow in Tallinn, Estonia, Estonian media responded by stating that whilst Estonia loves hockey, they do not need "A Russian bastion of soft-power" coming to Tallinn as "the monsters of the East do not look honest" (Vorotnikov & Ivanova, 2019: 120).

While the KHL has been the most prominent example, earlier studies have revealed that ice hockey is used for a variety of political reasons globally. Dinamo Riga Hockey Club, for example, has been utilised as a part of Latvian nation branding (Brencis & Ikkala, 2013), while ice hockey matches in Canada have been used to promote ethnic identities and gender equality (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Existing research on these cases shows that ice hockey may be politicised to promote a nation's or government's political agenda, boost a leader's popularity, aid in influence over, and alliances with, other nations, and aid in nation-building and identity formation. However, two overwhelming features make ice hockey a beneficial sport for leaders to politicise to attain the abovementioned results. Firstly, the personal attachment leaders may have to ice hockey, and secondly, key mega-events that occur within the sport.

Personal attachment can help with the politicisation of any sport, but it has been particularly useful with ice hockey due to the size of the sport. For leaders such as Vladimir Putin or Aliaksandr Lukashenka, their personal attachment to ice hockey can, as Kaal (2021: 371) explains, tell appealing stories about themselves and who the person behind the politician is. In return, they forge an emotional bond with citizens to cement their support. Further, a

personal attachment to ice hockey, something of popular culture, will allow politicians to temporarily disassociate themselves from politics and any negative connotations, and attract the attention of people who are perceived to be uninterested in politics Kaal (2021: 371-372).

Second, ice hockey has more mega-events than other sports due to yearly world championships and inclusion in the Winter Olympics. While these mega-events are not as vast as other sports, their size is far more effective for politicisation. Particularly for emerging, less strong states. These developing countries are increasingly investing in sports to gain international recognition (Grix, 2012: 6), and the opportunity to host an event like the Ice Hockey World Championships can be interpreted as a smaller state's attempt to communicate to the rest of the world who they are and what they stand for. This strategy, however, can only be met by hosting these "smaller, less glamorous" events (Grix, 2012: 6). As a result, prior hosts have included developing countries such as Belarus, Slovakia, and Latvia.

2.4 The Soviet Union: A Catalyst for the Politicisation of Sport

The Soviet Union was the first to politicise ice hockey, but it was not only ice hockey that the Soviet Union began to politicise. As it began to recognise how sport may impact political directions and decisions, the Soviet Union acted as a catalyst for a far broader politicisation of sport. As a result, the Soviet Union had no hesitation about admitting or publicising their politicisation of sport, with sport being designated as a matter of state importance (Beck, 2005: 175). As a result, the sporting world has experienced significant changes, which have been predominantly pioneered by countries that were once part of the Communist bloc (Howell, 1975: 137).

The 1949 Soviet resolution stated that sport's task was to establish increased levels of success by Soviet athletes to create a victory for the Soviet form of society and the socialist sports system that would provide a form of superiority for Soviet culture over capitalist states (Beck, 2005: 175). Sport eventually became a crucial component of the Soviet Union's foreign policy, with cultural representations being used as the forefront of international propaganda campaigns, and to forge new diplomatic relationships with major international organisations, or states (O'Mahony, 2006: 151). This all contributed to promoting the Soviet regimes' agenda, ensuring the survival of the Soviet system, and ensuring that there was international legitimacy for the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union politicised sport to promote the regime's communist agenda and used sport as a battleground for communism vs capitalism and for the East vs West, with sporting competitions becoming testing grounds for the two great political units and allowed the world to witness the different ideologies (Riordan, 1974: 322). In short, sport had become the centre ground for the promotion of the Soviet regime.

To form and advance international partnerships under a form of sporting diplomacy, the Soviet Union particularly promoted good relations with states bordering the Soviet Union for strategic reasons, including demonstrating the progress made by people under socialism (Riordan, 1974: 329). Not only was sport being used to promote new partnerships and good relations, but it was also used to expand the influence of the Soviet agenda. To ensure this, sporting ties were created with neighbouring states, and new sporting competitions took place to influence, and improve, diplomatic relations (Riordan, 1974: 331). This may have also been an attempt to increase support for communism and the Soviet Union. This increase of influence, and spread of Soviet ideals, will have also helped ensure the Soviet Union gained greater international legitimacy.

Finally, the Soviet Union used the politicisation of sport to promote the regime internally to improve its chances of survival and domestic legitimacy. From the ruling Communist Party's point of view, the politicisation of sport through the Soviet sports programme was a success since it acted as a means of social control, a way of attracting individuals into state-sponsored activities and increased the international prestige of the Soviet Union (Howell, 1975: 144). The politicisation of sport, and the subsequent sporting success, was a powerful source of both international recognition and domestic legitimacy for the Soviet Union, and, as such, greatly contributed to the ability of the Soviet regime to survive (Arnold, 2018: 129).

2.5 Post-Soviet Sporting Models

Within the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc during the Cold War, there was clear domination of sport by the state for political purposes (Riordan, 1990: 73) and the Soviet sporting model was characterised by a centralised organisation at the service of the state. Meanwhile, the West claimed that the separation of politics and athletics was a vital Western, liberal ideal throughout the East-West ideas war (Beck, 2005: 178). However, by the 1990s, right before the Soviet Union collapsed, many Soviet countries were adopting a Western

sporting model. This prompted speculation about whether Soviet sports would no longer be discussed, whether all Soviet states would embrace a full Western sporting model, or whether states would take a new course and develop a new model, ‘somewhere between sports for the service of the market economy and sports at the service of the state?’ (Andreff, & Szymanski, 2006: 323).

So far, there are no clear answers. Some former Soviet and Communist states have used politics to create a sporting society that resembles the situation of sport throughout Western Europe (Kobiela, 2011: 92), whilst others have used sport in a manner that replicates the actions of the Soviet Union and presents the nation as a potential heir (Arnold, 2018: 138). This can be referred to as the neo-Sovietisation of society in which the politicisation of sport plays a key role (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021: 2). If a country is experiencing the construction of a neo-Soviet society, then we would expect to find the politicisation of sport to contain Soviet legacies and feature Soviet methods and techniques for how to politicise sport in a regime’s favour.

In these cases, the organisation of society, including sport, has remained largely unchanged (Rodriguez-Diaz et al, 2020: 5-6). The values of such a model, and society, are still based on the values and norms of communist culture rooted in an individual, in what Greene (2019: 181), references as the “homo post-sovieticus”. Effectively, this means a continuation of Soviet traditions. Countries that are adopting this model will also likely have strong geopolitical relations and alliances with Russia (Rodriguez-Diaz et al, 2020: 5).

When it comes to sport, Rodriguez-Diaz et al (2020: 5) continue and state that many senior sports officials in countries adopting this model were educated in the Soviet era and continue to believe public officials should be involved in sport to help achieve international success. Here, international success can refer to both the sporting arena and the political arena. Under this sort of model, sport will be used to demonstrate the superiority of a state’s political system and approach and, build a confrontation between East and West (Riordan, 1980: 348). However, these governments and public officials are often denounced by international sporting bodies due to issues of suppression, particularly when these officials are part of a weakly governed society that is identified in symbolic imaginary with a widely publicised leader (Rodriguez-Diaz et al, 2020: 5).

In research by Rodriguez-Diaz et al (2020), this system is known as a post-Soviet presidentialism model. However, not all post-Soviet states are willing to adopt such a heavily

Sovietised sporting model. Many post-Soviet states, such as Latvia and Lithuania, believe that the Soviet sports model was an “alien, Communist Party imposed institution” (Riordan, 2012: 295). This signals the desire of some post-Soviet states to fully remove their Soviet connections and identity and to align more with the West. As such, post-Soviet presidentialism has become one of three post-Soviet models alongside models known as neoliberal or transitional.

According to Rodriguez-Diaz et al (2020: 4), a neoliberal model is adopted by post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe that have fully integrated into a Western sporting model and structures. In most cases, this is both in sporting terms and politically with these countries most likely having strong geopolitical relations with the West. However, not everyone in a post-Soviet society may be happy with such a radical shift in sporting policy towards neoliberalism. Some argue that the old Soviet sporting model was much more inclusive compared to the West, with more opportunities for women, ethnic minorities, and smaller states within the USSR to play and succeed (Riordan, 2012: 290). Consequently, some states have found themselves in a transition period, resulting in a third model.

The third possible model is known as transitional and is adopted by states who are still in the transition from a socialist society to an open market society, with their sporting societies also facing a similar transition. Here, such a transition in sport consists of an accelerated shift from state control of, and support towards, sport, and instead, sport becomes private and commercial outside the realm of politics and state control (Riordan, 2012: 290). For countries under a transitional model, there are strong remnants of the former communist or Soviet regime, but there is now clear evidence of a pro-Western and pro-European focus (Rodriguez-Diaz et al, 2020: 4).

Rodriguez-Diaz et al (2020: 7) conclude that these models represent three significant variants of nation-building in post-Soviet countries which are stuck in a dilemma of whether to opt for a neoliberal marker or for a strong state that would regulate the economy. Importantly though, Rodriguez-Diaz et al (2020: 7), further emphasise that whichever model is adopted, sport can be used as a cultural symbol to produce an identity. However, post-Soviet states may still be divided about how much post-Soviet nostalgia, influence, and methods they are willing to accept as part of such an identity.

2.6 Global Sport Mega-Events

Throughout this section, I have referred to global sporting mega-events, which Roche (2002: 1) characterises as large scale cultural and sporting events that have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance. Horne (2017: 329) extends this definition to highlight the characteristics of sports mega-events including the promise of a festival of sport with life-changing moments, but also the attraction of “significant social, political, economic, and ideological consequences for the host city, region or nation”. These events remind us that global sport mega-events exist as part of the political sphere. As part of this existence, the role of mega-events can be conceived as helping to achieve national and international objectives and linking internal and external policy targets as a means of optimising the pursuit of foreign policy and nation-building agendas (Jackson & Haigh, 2008: 356).

Such significances ensure mega-events are a key tool when it comes to the politicisation of sport since it is in the act of hosting global events that the most potent political messages are formed (Horne, 2016: 266), with certain former Eastern bloc countries using the hosting of major sporting events to show an act of resistance against the West (Hassan, 2018: 737). As Chadwick (2015) argues, “sport nowadays is not only about big business, but also global politics and strategic influence”.

This thesis refers to the 2014 and 2021 Ice Hockey World Championships sporting mega-events to assess the political agenda of the Belarusian regime. Now whilst some researchers such as Black (2014) and Muller (2015) may not class the Ice Hockey World Championships as mega-events, I would justify that they are since they fall in line with the definition provided by Roche (2002) and the characteristics stated by Horne (2017). The World Championships are large, yearly events attracting up to 500,000 fans, with a further 1.6 billion viewers watching on tv over a 2–3-week tournament. This is a figure higher than the 2018 Commonwealth Games mega-event, for example. The tournament also has massive international significance with representing countries from North America, Europe, Eurasia, and Asia at an event that provides the most prestigious prize in ice hockey.

Consequently, the Ice Hockey World Championships *should* be classed, and treated, as a global sporting mega-event. As a result, it is worth researching more into what mega-events are, how they relate to politics, and how they might be exploited by political regimes, particularly as most existing research does not consider why there has been a growing desire amongst developing countries to stage such expensive and elaborate events (Grix, 2012: 4).

Until the 1980s, it was difficult to find a state willing to take on the financial burden of hosting such an event (Grix, 2012: 4). As with much of the politicisation of sport, the Soviet Union acted as a catalyst when it comes to states willingly hosting such an event by recognising the political gains from doing so. However, recently, there has been a major shift from world superpowers competing amongst each other to host events, to small and emerging states competing to hold mega-events (Grix, 2012: 4). Many of these emerging regimes are considered illiberal, with authoritarian leaders now expressing a desire to host mega-events not only for sporting purposes but also for political reasons, such as conveying legitimacy in their rule and strengthening their power.

However, the growing use of sporting mega-events by authoritarian states has significantly weakened the global sporting order. Sporting officials, and supporters, are now becoming ever critical of how and where mega-events are hosted. For example, the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championships in Minsk, Belarus represented the source of some regret for supporters of the sport due to the Lukashenka regime overseeing an unethical electoral system, the rendition of outspoken opponents and a long list of political prisoners (Hassan, 2018: 740). Drastically though, the authoritarian leaders do not care about such criticism if the events can provide them with political power or leverage. Especially when the sporting institutions around the world continue to turn a blind eye to politics and keep awarding authoritarian states mega-events to host. Yes, these already criticised authoritarian states will receive more criticism from supporters of the respective sport, but the authoritarian leaders see an opportunity to convey a range of desirable messages and reinterpret their global positioning (Rookwood, 2021: 8-9).

There will be both domestic and foreign policy advantages to a state hosting a mega-event. Domestically, hosting a major international sporting event provides state officials with an important opportunity to increase their approval and popularity rating (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 25). For regimes under threat, this may be vital in ensuring the survival of the leader and entire regime. The regime will be able to create a new, positive discourse based upon hosting the event through highlighting the construction of new infrastructure and providing new sport and leisure facilities which can become a useful political resource when it comes to electoral campaigning (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 25). Tetlak (2016: 155) argues here that this is an example of the mega-events being used to increase the legitimacy of a regime, in which the leaders opt for sporting discourses based on political persuasion. Meanwhile, Lankina et al (2016: 1614), state that this is a clear example of a post-Soviet sporting model that maintains a certain heritage of the communist model. This suggests that states who follow post-Soviet

presidentialism, as discussed previously, would be the main adopters, and beneficiaries, of sporting mega-events.

Further, Grix (2012: 7) states that these legacies also bring about a “feel-good factor” amongst the population that boosts morale whilst breaching existing boundaries between ethnic, socioeconomic, or religious groups. This can help an authoritarian leader in cementing a unified identity in their society. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to suggest that this feel-good factor continues long after the event, nor is there evidence of any change in public behaviour that may be hoped for by policymakers (Grix, 2012: 5). Nonetheless, this feel-good element has the potential to influence instant public opinion, which may be critical if an election is held at a similar time. As a result, many emerging countries will attempt to hold mega-events soon before an election. The demand for a feel-good component, on the other hand, may suggest that political leaders are in jeopardy due to poor public support and approval ratings, or low political stability or government performance (Abelson, 2010: 83).

Attempting to portray a unified identity in society represents an example of how states can use sport, and mega-events, as a factor in nation-building. Nation-building, which also includes the creation of national identity, is important since the way a country is perceived, and visioned, affects its success in business, trade, tourism, or diplomatic and cultural relations with other states (Kobierecki & Strozek, 2017: 698). Here nation-building, or branding, is the process of designing, planning, and expressing the name and identity of a state, to communicate a specific image to help increase exports and investments and attract tourists and a skilled workforce. In turn, identity can also be cemented, and this can be presented through traditions, education, and sport (Kobierecki & Strozek, 2017: 699).

Nation-branding entails the choices of the elites, or ruling regime, as they often attempt to re-imagine a national identity (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011: 193). For post-Soviet states, for example, this “re-imagining” may be very important depending on whether they wish to continue with a culture of Soviet heritage or move to a more Western culture. The re-imagining of a national identity can be crucial for the local population, and for how the country position itself in the international arena (Pavlova & Zenkova, 2013: 3).

Kobierecki & Strozek (2017: 700) state that global sport mega-events can be employed in nation-branding/building as they provide the state with a chance to present itself to a global audience and creates an opportunity to communicate a particular message worldwide, with even just the awarding of an event sending a positive signal of inclusion and acceptance in the

international system. Hosting sporting mega-events ensures the world audience understands the host nation. By using the events to shape their international standing, particularly if they are having to decide between closer relations with the East or West, for example, the host state can portray an identity that will help build international partnerships and recognition which will be key in building the legitimacy of an emerging state.

Through the hosting of a mega-event, a state can influence other states' behaviours, and make their voice heard, in a diplomatic setting without using hard power tactics such as military presence or economic sanctions, for example (Bairner, Kelly & Lee, 2017: 25). Within such soft power tactics, here will we be able to witness a state's geopolitical preferences based on how they are behaving towards other states. In most cases, the state will believe hosting the event will increase its ability to persuade others to support its position on the international stage and allow them to project a successful image abroad (Grix, 2012: 6). This will particularly help regimes that have a poor reputation abroad, and a regime that requires international partnerships with other states to bolster their identity, or to ensure regime survival. As such, hosting the mega-event becomes a key tool for regimes when it comes to geopolitics.

Bairner, Kelly & Lee (2017: 25) continue the debate and state that mega-events taking place in emerging states are not so much related to boosting their soft power, but instead, they are more likely to function as part of the state joining an established political and economic order. This could be either the Western, liberal economic order or a Russian influenced, Eurasian economic order amongst others. If mega-events are about positioning themselves in a political and economic order, then we can assume that the hosting of mega-events can be used to create geopolitical partnerships that will improve a regime's image allowing them to be accepted into the order, which consequently will allow the regime to survive. Therefore, emerging states are increasingly investing resources into sports and events to accelerate their intro into the (or a) developed world (Grix, 2012: 6). As Grix (2012: 6) concludes, the increasing desire to host events by emerging countries "can be read as an attempt to announce to the world that they have finally arrived: it signifies a rite of passage for the host into the developed world or as an emerging state".

Most debates often conclude that the hosting of a global sport mega-event provides positive outcomes for the regime with increased legitimacy and international recognition, for example, and positive outcomes for the public due to a feel-good factor and improved local facilities. However, not all citizens benefit from the presumed legacies, with negative consequences, such

as huge economic debt, which can outweigh the positives, and this could result in a sporting mega-event having a detrimental effect on the ruling party (Gursoy & Kendall, 2006: 608). Although this effect may not become apparent until after at least one election cycle. Because of this, states should consider carefully whether they wish to host one mega-event, but even more so if they wish to host a second sporting mega-event. The comparison of the Belarusian hosting of the 2014 and 2021 International Ice Hockey Federation Ice Hockey World Championships (IIHFWC) will show that holding a willingness to host the same event twice does not always result in the same positive outcomes. Particularly if the state and the regime's political purpose agenda, and degree of legitimacy, have shifted between events.

3. Belarus: From Russkiy-Mir to Sporty-Mir

Developments in recent years have suggested that there may have been a shift in Belarusian politics away from the post-Soviet area and possibly towards Europe and the West. This has led to an explosion of literature on Belarus (Rudling, 2015: 115). However, this explosion of literature tends to only look at Belarus at one moment in time rather than over a period whereby change can be assessed. This is especially the case when it comes to the actions of the Lukashenka regime where they are consistently moving the goalposts to achieve their political agenda of increasing international partnerships and recognition, nation-building to create a clear Belarusian identity, and, of course, regime survival.

Whilst this new slate of literature on Belarus is welcomed by those like me who are heavily interested in the country, the literature does not always provide an opportunity to see and understand a shifting political agenda in the way that sporting phenomena can. Hence, why Senn (1999: 205) states that Belarus should no longer be considered through the concept of Russkiy Mir, but instead through “Sporty-Mir” whereby sport becomes the key instrument of the regime’s political agenda.

3.1 Historical and Political Background of Belarus

Belarus has often been characterised with a “stop-start” history (Wilson, 2021: 140). Belarusian lands can be traced back as far as the 11th century, however, an independent Belarusian state had, until recently, struggled to materialise. Instead, the present-day territory of Belarus has previously belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union (Lind, 2021: 11). The impact of Belarus’ stop-start history was visible following its unexpected independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The country was ill-prepared and 83% of the country did not support independence (Marples, 2003: 39). Consequently, it was difficult for the nation-building process to occur as Belarus had no state traditions and most residents refused to identify as residents of the new Belarusian state (Topolski, 2009: 7).

Whereas neighbouring states, such as Ukraine and Lithuania, held strong national identities, a willingness for independence, and political structures, Belarus did not. Belarusians were effectively living in an independent state without a shared history, culture, or language

(Manaev et al, 2011: 102). This did not provide the country with strong legitimacy. As such, the development of the Belarusian state and Belarusian politics took a drastically different path from their post-Soviet neighbours. As Shraibman (2018: 4) acknowledges, in the early years of the independent state, there were sluggish market reforms, low standards of living, high levels of corruption and criminality, and most of the population had nostalgia for the stable years of the Soviet Union. Korosteleva et al (2003: 3) further remember that the country was suffering from their inherited legacies and conflicts, which in turn led to economic stagnation, risk of system collapse, extreme social divisions, and international isolation.

Consequently, the 1994 Presidential elections, the only elections to have been deemed somewhat free and fair in Belarus, resulted in the little-known Aliaksandr Lukashenka coming to power and forming an authoritarian regime. Since then, the country's constitution has been arbitrarily changed, parliament and the independent media have been suppressed, opposition leaders have disappeared, been arrested or have been exiled, and there have been constant violations of human and civil rights (Korosteleva et al, 2003: 1). This level of authoritarianism has not allowed order and prosperity to rise, but instead, the post-Soviet development model for Belarus now consists of huge scale misappropriation of national wealth and impoverishment, whilst the regime humiliates Belarusian citizens under the false slogans of democracy, market economy and respect for human rights (Abadjian, 2020: 71).

According to Shraibman (2018: 3-4), the Lukashenka regime's authoritarianism has been rooted in respect for Belarus' Soviet past, weak state institutions, state dominance of the economy and dependency on close relations with Russia. Beichelt (2004: 113) offers similar reflections and states that alongside post-Soviet legacies, the regime has been maintained due to fraught economic slowdown, social inequality, weak civil society, and an identity crisis leading to societal fragmentation. Before independence from the Soviet Union, a famous Belarusian newspaper article in 1991 warned about the emergence of a new "Belarusian variant" of dictatorship because of these possible factors (Way, 2020: 18). Ironically though, the article was authored by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, indicating that Lukashenka long knew how his regime could consolidate power and take advantage of Belarus' weak internal structures and development.

Lukashenka freely admits to being Europe's last dictator, declaring in 2012, "I am Europe's last and only dictator" (Wilson, 2021: 20). More importantly, however, Lukashenka is simply an opportunist. For example, when Lukashenka initially entered politics in the late 1980s, he

would interact with any party that would accept him if he could be their leader, with one party leader claiming that Lukashenka had no political views other than how to put up his own candidacy for leadership (Wilson, 2021: 148). As a result, his politics have never been about a specific identity or ideology. It is simply a matter of identifying and seizing any opportunity to stay in power, with one opportunity being through the politicisation of sport.

Such opportunism means existing research cannot always agree on how to define the regime. Leshchenko (2008: 1419) states that the Lukashenka regime should be defined as “egalitarian nationalism”. Here the regime is built upon the claim of national uniqueness, where Lukashenka’s justification for his decisions, rhetoric and actions can be understood through the values of uniqueness, unity, and sovereignty of Belarusians. Other observers have described the existing regime as a “totalitarian system and a country stuck in a neo-Soviet time warp” (Manaev et al, 2011: 95). This is based on the regime pursuing the termination of checks and balance mechanisms, and creating various unconstitutional political, legal, and economic structures to influence the function of parliaments, courts, banks, and political parties (Manaev et al, 2011: 95). Whilst this is true, it is still difficult to define the regime as totalitarian for two reasons since the term totalitarian is often misused or understood. As such, totalitarianism may mean multiple things, to multiple people, and has lost value as a term in which to describe a political regime (Plaza, 2010: 2-3).

Meanwhile, Kazharski & Makarychev (2021: 2) would describe the regime as biopolitical. Here, the regime is constructed through the biopoliticisation of all aspects of society, e.g., sports, are turned into a paternalistic sphere of care. Such biopolitical regimes perceive, and deal, with the population as political flesh and reduce politics to issues of life and death, ensuring total control over their citizens (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021: 2). Here, the Lukashenka regime would argue that everything can be a threat and that only with total control can the government protect the citizens.

Whilst these are three valid definitions, they all contain one issue in that they represent the type of regime at one specific point of Lukashenka’s reign. But due to Lukashenka’s opportunist approach, it is impossible to define the regime based upon one moment in time. Particularly as the role of the dictator has consistently been changing since 1994 (Wilson, 2021: 305). However, despite their periodical differences, they all agree that the Lukashenka regime is authoritarian. Consequently, since all these definitions can be applied to authoritarianism, but will change dependent upon the needs of the regime, the most applicable definition for the

Lukashenka regime type is provided by Wilson (2021: 301) who describes the regime as an example of “adaptive authoritarianism”.

An existing 2019 study states adaptive authoritarian regimes can mix various strategies at different times (Wilson, 2019: 301). Egalitarian nationalism, totalitarianism, and bi-politicisation can all be examples of the strategies included in adaptive authoritarianism. Adaptive authoritarianism still falls under the realm of broader authoritarianism, which can be defined as “a political system in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined but actually quite predictable norms” (Linz & Stepan, 1996: 45), including sabotaging accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control by disabling their access to information and/or disabling their voice” (Glasius, 2018: 527).

Lukashenka has created a system to protect his adaptive authoritarian regime with mechanisms to mitigate threats to his stability (Shraibman, 2018: 5). Consequently, Belarusian politics has reflected the nature of such a regime system in which President Lukashenka is the only accepted source of policy (Allison et al, 2005: 510). The regime's authoritarian nature has been evident throughout important political events throughout Lukashenka's leadership, including elections, economic sanctions, and sporting mega-events. All of these have employed authoritarian measures to boost Lukashenka's influence and legitimacy, allowing the regime's political agenda to be met.

The regime has also been characterised by geopolitical relations. Initially, the newly independent Belarus moved towards the West, joining the Partnership for Peace, and negotiating a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with the EU. However, in 1996 a disputed referendum was held which strengthened the powers of the Presidency. This was poorly perceived by the West and Lukashenka's official policy became to move towards a much closer association with Russia, including plans for a bilateral union agreement (Allison et al, 2005: 488). This would come to be known as the Union State of Russia and Belarus which provides a pathway to unification between the two countries.

Following these events in 1996, Belarusian politics have been dominated by the direction of their relations between the East and West, but the regime has often avoided making a firm choice of direction. Yet, this became more difficult for Belarus in 2004 when the EU enlargement, featuring Belarus' Western neighbours, left Belarus, in the words of Lukashenka, “between the world's economic giant, the EU, to the West, and a Eurasian giant, Russia, to the East” (Allison et al, 2005: 490).

Because of close ties to Russia, and diplomatic concerns from the West, the EU has often posed sanctions on Belarus. Further, the IMF and the World Bank have not been willing to lend money to Lukashenka due to his authoritarian politics, lack of respect for human rights, and blockage of modern economic reforms. Consequently, Belarus has turned to Russia for stability and to enable the growth of Lukashenka's economic model (Jonavicius, 2013: 85). As part of the Union State Agreement, Russia has been the main external financial creditor of the Belarusian economy and, following the 2010 Presidential election in Belarus, became the only significant source of external credits for Belarus (Jonavicius, 2013: 88).

However, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 impacted Belarus' outlook on Russia with Lukashenka (*at the time*) asserting his support for Ukraine's territorial integrity (Polglase-Korostelev, 2020: 41). Belarus joined fellow post-Soviet states in raising their concerns and began to further balance relations with Russia and the West in the fear that a repeat of Ukraine could occur in Belarus (Polglase-Korostelev, 2020: 44). Lukashenka was worried that the revolution in Ukraine could influence the start of a Belarusian revolution, so he moved to strengthen his regime by moving closer to the EU.

By 2015, the EU had announced that most sanctions against Belarus would be suspended, reducing Russian reliance on the Belarusian economy, and allowing Lukashenka to counteract Russian influence in Belarus (Polglase-Korostelev, 2020: 41). However, as part of new Western relations, Belarus was required to provide economic development and wider sustainability including security, good governance, and democracy promotion under the EU's Eastern Partnership. Such pressure from the EU was putting Lukashenka's authoritarian regime at threat. But so was Russia who was unhappy with Lukashenka's Western relations. Consequently, Russia reduced export duties to zero by 2024, in a move that would be economically devastating for Belarus (Wilson, 2021: 259). As such, Belarus has since been in a process of a revival of the Union State, which was confirmed by Russian Prime Minister Medvedev in 2018. But, under the negotiated terms Lukashenka found further integration unacceptable, and whilst still balancing relations between Russia and the West, Belarus signed a visa facilitation agreement and a readmission agreement with the EU in January 2020 (Polglase-Korostelev, 2020: 42). This demonstrates that Belarus was once again at a crossroads between Russia and the West, because while relations with the West were enhancing, neither Minsk nor the EU expected significant improvement because this would require a change in regime policy for Lukashenka, which has always seemed unlikely (Snapkouski, 2021: 40).

Belarus' relations with the EU took another turn following the disputed 2020 Presidential election. This election had posed a real challenge for Lukashenka's survival, with a strong pro-Western opposition candidate in Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, who Lukashenka believes would apply for EU and NATO membership for Belarus, whilst exiting the Union State, and the Eurasian Union (Interfax, 18 August 2020). Here it should, however, be noted that any opposition in Belarus that is described as pro-Western, and not just Tsikhanouskaya, are those who call for less dependency on Russia, promotes the Belarusian culture and language, and removes Russian influence in Belarusian internal affairs (Lind, 2021: 18).

The 'official' results show that Lukashenka won the election with over 80% of the votes, but these results were not accepted by Belarusian citizens who consequently came out to protest demanding new elections and a change in leadership (Abadjian, 2020: 74). The regime responded through large levels of suppression, and in the six months following the election, 45,000 people, including key opposition figures, were detained, fined, or sentenced to years in prison, (Korosteleva & Petrova, 2021: 1). Meanwhile, the West responded by reintroducing sanctions including travel bans, asset freezes, and specific sanctions targeting economic actors, businessmen and companies that directly benefit the Lukashenka regime (Korosteleva & Petrova, 2021: 7). Consequently, to save his regime and reduce the economic impact, Lukashenka once again turned back towards Russia, in what Wilson (2021: 276) has described as Lukashenka's juggling strategy. The 2020 election demonstrated that despite an attempt to improve relations with the West, the survival of the regime is contingent on Russian support, despite an initial campaign built on anti-Russian rhetoric (Leukavets, 2021: 92).

3.2 Cyclicity of Belarus-Russian Relations

With Russia and Belarus notionally being the closest of allies, Lukashenka's rise to power has been built upon a rejection of pro-Western nationalism, in favour of societal, economic, and political reintegration with Russia (Nice, 2012: 5). However, the nature of the Union State Agreement that would allow such reintegration between Belarus and Russia, alongside the changing view of Belarusian people when it comes to Soviet heritage (Manaev et al, 2011: 95), has meant the Lukashenka regime has had to explore further options to maintain support and legitimacy. This has included looking Westward. A desire to weaken excessive dependence on the Eastern vector (Russia) has meant Belarus has explored the possibility of balanced

development of relations with both possible geographical vectors, East, and West (Snapkouski, 2021: 38). Cycles of conflict and engagement are built into Belarus' relationship with both the EU and Russia, and the regime has, so far, successfully exploited geopolitical competition in the post-Soviet space (Nice, 2012: 10).

Lukashenka's shift between East and West can be explained through a concept known as the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Here, Belarusian foreign policy does not follow a linear trajectory towards Russia but instead follows a cyclical pattern of demands, tension, and retreat (Nice, 2012: 6). Leukavets (2021: 91) offers a similar understanding by stating the complicated relations have the character of tensions and rapprochements, and phases of tensions and thaws.

Under this geopolitical cycle, the relations between the two states follow a continuous cycle of spells of closer integration and agreements before, due to social and political pressures, the relationship becomes distant and tense. Here, Abadjian (2020: 86) states that the cycle is an example of how the logic of confrontation functions, with the cycle representing how Belarus has become a geostrategic space "where the tectonic plates of liberal democracy and authoritarian oligarchy are clashing". If the cycle is in a stage of tension, or retreat, this is when we would expect to see the Lukashenka regime promote closer relations with the West (liberal democracy) to ensure safety and economic and political stability. If the cycle is in a stage of rapprochement, then we would expect to see Lukashenka increase integration and support for Russia (authoritarian oligarchy), potentially through a neo-Soviet nation-building process.

Wilson (2021) and Snapkouski (2021) indicate that there have been three clear cycles so far for the Lukashenka regime. Firstly between 1994-2000 when Belarus leant towards the West. The second stage covers 2000-2014 when Belarus consolidated relations with Russia in a spell of rapprochement. This stage allowed Lukashenka to adopt a "multi-vector policy" where a balanced foreign policy approach was taken, but this stage of the cycle ended with the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. Since then, Belarus has attempted to balance relations with Russia and the West in the fear that what happened to Ukraine, could also happen to them (Polglase-Korostelev, 2020: 41). Consequently, the next part of the cycle in 2014-2020 saw Belarus adopt a juggling strategy (Wilson, 2021: 255), as the cycle shifted back towards increased tensions with Russia. Here, there was a revival in relations with the West, but for this to continue there would have to have been a significant change in the political agenda of the Lukashenka regime, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy (Snapkouski, 2021: 40).

Since these policy changes did not occur the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations continued and following the events in 2020, there have been indications that the regime has ensured the cycle has entered a new stage and has returned to more rapprochement with Russia.

Lukashenka's statements often avoid an unambiguous commitment to East or West but have referred to the position that Belarus geographically finds itself in. (Allison et al, 2005: 487), So, whilst the Lukashenka regime has never specifically referred to the concept of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, the notion of shifting between East and West has been clearly demonstrated. The Lukashenka regime has traded political loyalty, and threatened geopolitical reorientation, to gain foreign support. This aims to influence internal actors through a mixture of coercion and inducements and perceive the actions of others (opposition) as illegitimate (Nice, 2012: 5), and also shows that the reorientation occurs primarily to ensure that his authoritarian grip on power remains unchallenged either by domestic opposition or by the Russian regime (Jonavicius, 2013: 82).

This geopolitical ambivalence provides the regime with a choice between its cultural and historical affinity with Russia to the East, and the gravitational pull of Western Europe. This is described as the "incomplete nature of project Belarus" – with "Project Belarus" representing the deep divisions within Belarusian society in terms of geopolitical, national identity, and support for Lukashenka (Manaev et al, 2011: 101). This has created a peculiar duality of geopolitical choice that the regime uses to its advantage in internal and external policies. This suggests that the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations will impact the political agenda of the regime and how it is presented. Simply, the political agenda will be adapted to a particular geopolitical choice (East or West) if it is more advantageous for the regime.

Lukashenka has often stressed that he would not choose between East and West (Zogg, 2018: 1). However, his opportunism alongside the dependency the Belarusian state requires of others, means a choice must be made. However, the cycle and choice cannot be made by the regime based on which would gain the most public support. This is because Belarusian society is not explicitly divided into pro-Russian and pro-European camps (Zogg, 2018: 4). So, as Krisciune & Jensen (2019: 2) ask "what is behind Belarus' apparently contradictory behaviour?". These can be answered by understanding more about Lukashenka's political agenda, how the choices, and how the cycle of relations is presented.

3.3 The Political Agenda of the Lukashenka Regime

Lukashenka once suggested that “foreign policy is the continuation of domestic politics, but by other means” (Allison et al, 2005: 498). Consequently, it is highly expected that the cyclicity of Belarusian-Russian relations will have roots within the political agenda of the Lukashenka regime, which consists of forming international partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival. I will now explore, and explain, these three key components of the Belarusian regime’s political agenda. In doing so, I will also demonstrate how the geopolitical positioning of the Belarusian regime, and the state of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, will impact how the political agenda is constructed and promoted.

3.31 International Partnerships and Diplomatic Relations

The first aspect of the Belarusian’s regime political agenda is to form, and cement, new international partnerships, with Tolstrup (2015) showing that forming international partnerships is always a part of a post-Soviet authoritarian state’s political agenda. This is important for an adaptive authoritarian regime since global, diplomatic partnerships will help increase a country’s legitimacy (Aldecoa & Keating, 2013: 5). Increasing legitimacy will also secure the regime with stability, provide an opportunity to explain its mean of rule, and increase the regime’s durability (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017: 287-8). There is also an economic aspect of international partnerships where Belarus will either look toward Western partners for financial support when Russia can no longer economically support the Lukashenka regime, or alternatively, Belarus will look for new partners in the Eastern sphere to help reduce the financial impact of any sanctions from the West (Sannikov, 2005: 79). In these circumstances, the regime will also look for specific partnerships to help secure electoral victories through election bolstering and prevent a radical and undesired regime change (Tolstrup, 2015: 673).

If the Belarusian regime is at a stage in the cycle when they are aligning themselves with the West, the regime will be looking to create new international partnerships to make Belarus less dependent on Russia and increase its legitimacy in global institutions. Following the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, Belarus-Russian relations have become problematic, and Belarus has searched for new international partners to compensate for their relationship with Russia. In addition, Belarus has had to look to create new diplomatic partnerships, primarily with the EU, to help replace

the economic dependency it has on Russia due to a struggling Russian economy (Kryvoi, 2015: 6).

Further, it should also be noted that the people of Belarus understand the value of partnerships (Lind, 2021: 45). The regime will continuously look for increased public support, so if the citizens of Belarus express a preference for new partnerships with the West, then the regime may look to increase partnerships with Western nations to boost public support (Sannikov, 2005: 80). But similarly, as an adaptive authoritarian regime, they may also look to form partnerships to be able to crush domestic opposition. This has been the case following the numerous elections where Lukashenka strategically chose Russia as a partner to challenge what the regime saw as the pro-Western, nationalist opposition (Lind, 2021: 12). If the opposition embraces pro-European partnerships, then it is likely the Lukashenka regime will look to an increased partnership with Russia to suppress the opposition and reduce their influence with the support of external forces (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021: 3).

If the Belarusian regime is clearly at a stage of the cycle where they are re-aligning themselves with Russia, they will look to form, or re-instate, international relationships with Russia and other states in the post-Soviet sphere of influence. This often occurs when Belarus has been hit with sanctions from the West as the Belarusian regime believes international partnerships with the East will ensure that any measures imposed by the West will have no impact on the regime itself (Sannikov, 2005: 85). In another juggling act strategy, this could indicate that partnerships are there to protect the Belarusian economy, but also to ensure regime survival and increase legitimacy in the Eastern sphere of influence. This is vital since it will prevent Belarus from international isolation which would be dangerous to the economy, the legitimacy of the regime, and even the wider state (Jarabik, 2009: 2).

3.32 Nation-Building and Search for Identity

The second, and most substantial, aspect of the Belarusian regime's political agenda is nation-building and the search for a Belarusian identity. According to Bulhakau (2006: 100), most people in Belarus are not aware of what it means to be Belarusian, and the Belarusian regime has acknowledged that a strong Belarusian identity may be required if they are going to cement their control. The Lukashenka regime has since felt that they need to develop a strong Belarusian identity to help avoid any conflict with Russia and distance themselves when need be (Kryvoi, 2015: 5). However, with Lukashenka carrying out policies of Russification, suppressing what he describes as the nationalist opposition, and even declaring that Belarus

“will always be with the Russian people” and that “if you [the West] would like to call us Russia’s outpost in the West, we do not mind” (Nice, 2012: 6), questions remain about the Lukashenka regime’s true nation-building priorities. Does Lukashenka really desire a distinct Belarusian identity in a move to remove the “blended influence” of the USSR (Lind, 2021: 6)? Or is this simply a short-term opportunist reaction to social turbulence? Either way, Lukashenka needs to ensure nation-building and the formation of a national identity since any form of political community needs to define, and build, an identity (Nice, 2012: 7).

Lukashenka’s brand of identity politics has placed an emphasis on Soviet heritage and a nod to Slavic brotherhood (Nice, 2012: 11) and Smok (2013: 41) shows that the current ideological discourse of the regime ensures that Belarusians have a rather weak national identity. The nation-building process has been focused on the creation of a Belarusian identity in the image of the leader, Lukashenka, and his preferred ideology rather than any rehabilitation of historical Belarusian culture (Shumskaya, 2021: 118). However, due to the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, this ideological identity can result in Belarusian national identity being split between what the regime would describe as “Westernisers and people with pro-Russian orientation” (Ioffe, 2003: 1255).

Due to Belarus’ strong Soviet heritage, both societally and politically, historical roots may be able to give guidance on what a true Belarusian identity is and how the nation-building process is structured. Here, two concepts should be introduced. The *Russkiy Mir*, and *Rzeczpospolita*. These concepts will also help with later assessments of the Belarusian regime’s political agenda and their use of sport in line with the theory set out in section 2.

Firstly, the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World). This is an ideologically constructed concept, by the Russian state, aimed at re-uniting historic Russia and Russian-speaking lands (Lind, 2021: 13). If Lastouski’s (2015) analysis stating Belarusian identity is an ideological project centred around Russo-centrism, which would see Belarus as part of a ‘triunite’ group of Russian people in a Slavic civilisation next to the West, is to be believed, then Belarus can firmly be considered as part of the *Russkiy Mir*. Under the influence of the *Russkiy Mir*, we would expect to see the regime move towards a pro-Russian identity which cements Belarus’ Soviet heritage rather than a unique Belarusian, or Western, identity.

Research by Gorham (2019) suggests that Lukashenka is happy to embrace the *Russkiy Mir* in his political agenda and nation-building. However, Boulegue (2020: 2) argues that Lukashenka would move away from the *Russkiy Mir* if the Kremlin’s policy towards ‘The Russian World’

became detrimental to their interests. Add this to Fabrykant's (2019: 1) acknowledgement that the Russian leaning identity still holds some anti-Russian attitudes, then an alternative concept may be required to explain Belarusian identity. Consequently, whilst some believe Belarus to be an heir to the Soviet Union, others consider Belarus as an heir to Rzeczpospolita (Ioffe, 2012: 129). Rzeczpospolita refers to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and to an area that now covers modern day Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. Rzeczpospolita acts as an alternative option from where Belarusian identity could historically stem and is explained through but from a much more Western/European perspective. Under an identity influenced by Rzeczpospolita, we would expect to see the regime follow anti-Russian nationalism and move towards cementing a unique, Belarusian identity.

Rzeczpospolita is much more difficult to define ideologically than the Russkiy Mir. However, there are some indications of what a Rzeczpospolita ideology and identity would incorporate. Firstly, the Rzeczpospolita period was centred around a Sarmats ideology which brought Western influences, but not in favour of full Europeanisation (Tsikhamirau, 2012: 117). This suggests an identity that is closer to Europeanisation, but one that still holds a unique identity. Secondly, Rzeczpospolita was characterised by anti-Russian resistance, and a political and ideological struggle with Russia, with demands to preserve traditions of political, social, and economic structure of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Tsikhamirau, 2012: 119). Both factors indicate that Belarus may hold an anti-Russian identity. If the political agenda is promoting the Rzeczpospolita, this may help explain any shift Westward in Lukashenka's nation-building.

However, just as Lukashenka has indicated criticism towards the Russkiy Mir, he has also dismissed the concept of Rzeczpospolita calling the period an "ethnocide of Belarusians" (BeITA, 2022). Wavering criticisms of both historical roots of identity is an example of Sovereignty Trading (Kazharski, 2021: 71). Here, Lukashenka would be willing to adapt his nation-building to fit a specific pro or anti-Russian identity in return for political support for his regime. For example, adopting the Russkiy Mir to gain support from Russia, or adopting Rzeczpospolita to gain support from the West. Again, this highlights extensive opportunism, his juggling act approach, and the implications of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

Another way of comparing the historical Russkiy Mir and Rzeczpospolita when it comes to nation-building is by stating that Belarus is once again left with a choice between the Slavic identity of the East, or the European identity of the West (Allison et al, 2005: 488). These emerging conflicts of identities may be because of a sense of growing exclusion from both East

and West (Korosteleva et al, 2003: 3). Therefore, to prevent exclusion, the ruling regime will have to embrace one or the other more strongly. Consequently, the stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, and the geopolitical preference of the regime, will influence the direction that the Lukashenka nation-building will take. If the regime is shifting Westward politically, then we would expect to see nation-building promote a more European identity, or at least a unique Belarusian identity that is vastly different from, and that may reject, the Russian and Soviet identity. However, if the regime is looking Eastward, then we would expect to see a nation-building process promoting an identity with strong Russian, or neo-Soviet characteristics. These two options will differ by language, historical memory, relations with other countries and their vision for the country's future developments (Shumskaya, 2021: 115).

For the pro-Russian identity, the language will be Russian, historical memory will be with the *Russkiy Mir*, and international relations will focus on Eurasia and the post-Soviet space whilst rejecting Western leaning, nationalist opposition. These actions will weaken a European identity of Belarusians. Analysts call this approach Soviet-Belarusian patriotism where there is an adoption of the Soviet identity in place of national, self-identity (Manaev et al, 2011: 101). This may also be referred to as neo-Sovietism, a policy which Lukashenka has actively adopted in the cycle of relations up until 2014, and post 2020 (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021: 2). Here, the personality of Belarusians is built upon a Soviet legacy, and Belarus assumes a hegemonic role over the production and application of Soviet discourse, with full control over its meanings (Gerasimov, 2020: 262).

Alternatively, there is an option of a more Western, or unique, Belarusian identity and nation-building process. For this, the language would be Belarusian, the historical memory would be with the *Rzeczpospolita*, international relations would focus on Europe and the West, and developments for the future would be on an anti-Russian, distinct Belarusian platform. Under this approach there would also be an increase in national values and symbols, and a significant attempt to open Belarus to others, such as foreign tourists (Lind, 2021: 14). This is a process called soft-Belarusianisation, which interestingly was Lukashenka's approach during the 2014-2020 stage of the cycle of Belarus-Russian relations.

Nation-building and the construction of a national identity is a key part of the Belarusian regime's political agenda since this will enable the regime to correspond to the challenges of globalisation, external pressures of different kinds, and provide the regime with a chance for the future (Titarenko, 2011: 18). Arguably, a national identity is more important than the

dependency of international partnerships (Ioffe, 2021: 156). However, there is still no single Belarusian identity and instead the elite has been split between a Westerniser approach (Rzeczpospolita) or a pro-Russian approach (Russkiy Mir). Yet, whilst nation-building is the most substantial aspect of the political agenda, regime survival is the most vital to Lukashenka. After all, in true dictator fashion, Lukashenka wants nothing but power.

3.33 Regime Survival

Following instability and revolutions across the post-Soviet sphere of influence, the Belarusian regime fears that any threat to the regime would destabilise the Belarusian nation-building process that they have started and provide an opportunity for external powers to increase their influence over the country (Leshchenko, 2008: 1428). There are many threats that could lead to a regime collapse in Belarus with Shraibman (2018) highlighting external pressure, economic difficulties, and a growing domestic opposition. Resultingly, to ensure regime survival, the Lukashenka regime must balance gaining support from Belarusian citizens, and from the international community.

Balancing threats and influence, both externally and domestically, to ensure regime survival is also dependent upon the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. With Lukashenka successfully manoeuvring his regimes' geopolitical positions to ensure his own survival (Jonavicius, 2013: 84). Both Russia and the EU can provide Lukashenka with the relations the regime needs to survive, but the preferred option will depend on the political circumstances faced. During the pro-EU stage of the cycle of relations stage in between 2014-2020, we saw the EU provide the necessities for regime survival. Meanwhile, events since the 2020 election have shown that despite efforts at improving relations with the West, the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations will always ensure that there will be a return to the survival of the Belarusian regime being contingent on Russia's support (Kazharski, 2021: 71).

Marples' (2013) study suggests that regime survival is more likely to come from the East than the West, although this is not always a guarantee. Close relations with the EU and the West can help ensure regime survival through meeting the agenda of forming international partnerships. Besides geopolitical relations, Lukashenka needs a stable economy to survive, so when Russian financial support dwindled in the 2010s, Lukashenka turned towards the EU. For many years following Russian financial crisis, the EU became the main export market for

Belarus. Lukashenka and his regime will therefore recognise that relations with the EU can be important for the survival of the Belarusian economy (Balmaceda et al, 2009: 97), and in turn, his regime.

Similarly, and particularly during the 2014-2020 cycle of relations, there has been a potential threat to the survival of the Lukashenka regime due to high dependency on Russia, much of which has been unfavourable to Belarus (Polglase-Korostelev, 2020: 43). In response, knowing that improved relations with Russia are needed for the regime to survive, Belarus can turn towards the West for support to antagonise Russia into giving Belarus a more favourable relationship. The Russian regime cannot afford for Belarus to move Westward, and therefore Lukashenka can do and say things other leaders of such a small independent state can do or say (Jonavicius, 2013: 82).

Yet, despite any positive impacts from relations with the West, Lukashenka will always use Russia as a guarantee of his personal political survival even if he must adapt to new realities and change his policy and approach towards Russia (Balmaceda et al, 2009: 95). Therefore, when faced domestic pressure, despite attempts to move in the opposite direction to Russia, Lukashenka will always return to Russia for support (Wilson, 2021: 12). Every time when doing so, Lukashenka has managed to position himself geopolitically so that three successive Russian presidents, when faced with the choice of whether to not continuing to support him, have always done so (Shraibman, 2018: 8). But, due to existing Russian influence in the country, the Russian regime would also be able to dispose of Lukashenka at a time of their choosing (Wilson, 2021: 295-296). Therefore, any moves towards the EU and the West to ensure regime survival will only ever be temporary (Jarabik, 2009: 2).

Still, whether the regime shifts East or West in the name of regime survival, survival would not be possible without some genuine public support and not just manipulated election results. Similarly, regime survival is also built upon crushing opposition, and this is something that has been heavily witnessed since the 2020 election. For example, as shown by (Shraibman, 2018: 8), Lukashenka does not allow any pro-Russian opposition to form to prevent Russia considering supporting a regime change in Belarus.

On the other hand, when there is a pro-Western opposition (which may occasionally allow Lukashenka to maintain Russian support for the regime in the face of the alternative), Lukashenka may use nation-building to create a sense of unity between the government and citizens or improve domestic infrastructure to gain public support (Rodriquez-Diaz et al, 2021:

6). In addition, Lukashenka will also look for ways for citizens to let off steam (Shraibman, 2018: 8). One method is through sport and through celebrating sporting success. In this scenario, regime survival can also be achieved since sport provides an opportunity to create a positive outlook for the regime, as noted in section 2.

3.4 Sports and Politics in Belarus

There has unfortunately been an avoidance of direct geopolitical narrative in the political discourse of Lukashenka and his ruling regime (Kazharski & Makarycehv, 2021: 3). As such, it can be difficult to witness what stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations the regime finds themselves in, and how their political agenda is being presented. But, because of the politicisation of sport, we can witness different stages of the cycle, and the impact of the political agenda, through sport. Nizhnikau & Alvari (2016: 79) suggest that sport's special place in Belarusian politics allows us to understand the motives of the government's actions and priorities.

Any dictator understands the value of sport, which has evolved from being a source of social recreation to becoming a propaganda tool for the state (Babina, 2012: 107). Lukashenka knows this value, and, in Belarus' case, this is presented through two Ice Hockey World Championships from two different stages of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Firstly, the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championships hosted by Minsk during the 2014-2020 stage of pro-Western relations, and, secondly, the 2021 planned hosting by Minsk in the emerging 2020-present pro-Russian stage in the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

The power and influence the regime holds in sport can be witnessed through their investment and control over sport in the country. The Belarusian regime has provided support and development for over 130 different sports in the country (*See Belarus.by*). However, none has received a greater focus than Lukashenka's favourite sport: ice hockey. A sport which in Belarus gathers a lot of support, unites people, and appeals to collectivism. Here, ice hockey proposes the idea of collectiveness representing an imaginary community that shares the concept of mutuality. The imagined community of Belarusians is reinforced through ice hockey and the people involved (Lind, 2021: 35). For example, the Minsk Arena, a sporting complex built specifically for international ice hockey tournaments, acts as a symbol of Belarus (Babina, 2012: 103). However, whilst ice hockey can reinforce such concepts, in Belarus sport cannot

be dissociated with politics and instead these symbols can instead be seen to represent the ambitions of the Belarusian regime.

In Belarus every sport has its curators amongst regime officials resulting in sport, and sporting mega-events, becoming a factor in a particularly repellent kind of politics (Babina, 2012: 107). Yet it is important to highlight that whilst hosting of the Ice Hockey World Championships is a powerful tool for the Belarusian regime, not all citizens are supportive of hosting the event. Ahead of the 2014 World Championships in Minsk, Babina (2012: 105) asked several citizens “How do you view plans to hold the Ice Hockey World Championships in Minsk?”. Many responses included remarks about how ice hockey is associated with Lukashenka, so the prospects of hosting the championship are bleak. They were seen as a tool to promote the regime’s agenda and priorities, not citizens who worry about surviving on their pension, live on a miserable salary, and children who live in poverty (Babina, 2012: 105). The overall conclusion was that citizens do not need Belarus to host the tournament, but “there can be no doubt at all that those who do need the championships in Minsk are none other than Lukashenka and his team” (Babina, 2012: 104).

Holding the Ice Hockey World Championships in Minsk only provides a powerful advantage for Lukashenka and his regime. Under Lukashenka, it is suggested that the post-Soviet presidentialism model of sports and politics is used, with sport being subjected to state management with a focus on hosting sporting mega-events. This is to raise the country’s standings in international contexts, strengthen and reproduce national identity, and reflect and support the charisma of the respective leader (Rodriquez-Diaz et al, 2021: 6). Resultingly, in a similar fashion to this, Lukashenka can use sport and mega-events to promote his political agenda built upon international partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival.

Firstly, international partnerships, where Lukashenka uses sport as an indicator of his country’s international standing (Marples, 2004: 32). As discussed in section 2, sport can provide the grounds to facilitate such partnerships and will allow Belarus to engage, inform and create a favourable image in their attempts (Murray & Pigman, 2014: 1101). Sporting events will allow Belarus to engage with new partners they may not have previously been able to do so, due to their exclusion from major political international organisations, and show their legitimate support for such partnerships. I.e., hosting of events and welcoming their new partners shows a genuine commitment, as would increasing tourism to promote economic ties, and raise the image of the state in the international community (Grigorov, 2014: 14). Similarly, in line with

Ridordan's (1974: 331) argument, sport can be used to expand the influence of a regime, and this could be applied to the agenda of international partnerships when the ruling regime is creating partnerships through sporting narratives to weaken an opposition.

Based on these factors, sport and international partnerships will impact, and be witnessed in the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations in the following manner. During a pro-Western stage of the cycle, sporting events, such as the 2014 IIHFWC, have been used to invite the new partners from the West to form diplomatic relations with Belarus, and for the regime to confirm their desire to develop relations with the West. During a pro-Russian stage of the cycle, the Ice Hockey World Championships have been used to increase integration between Belarus and Russia, and use the process of othering against former, Western international partnerships.

Secondly, nation-building. Here, sports can help describe a nation in terms of its social values and serves as a powerful tool of nation branding to help achieve recognition all over the world (Dinnie, 2015: 124). Whilst sport, and the hosting of sporting mega-events, will not necessarily create a Belarusian identity, they will provide a platform for the regime to promote their desired identity, whether this be influenced by the *Russkiy Mir* or *Rzeczpospolita*. Sport has the power to place an identity on the global stage and introduce the nation to global partners. Additionally, since nation-building also incorporates policy advancement, sport will provide the Belarusian regime a stage to make political statements that would confirm their desired identity and process of nation-building. Here, you would expect to see political statements either directed at the East or West dependent on the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Ultimately, following Cha (2009: 1589) explanation, Belarus will follow many post-Soviet stages in using sport to allow the nation to express independence from states, or alternative political agendas, by whom they may feel threatened. For Belarus, this would be either the West, Russia, or even domestic opposition. This will particularly when the regime cannot promote their identity under normal political terms due to these threats. Instead, the Belarusian regime will use sport as an opportunity to express their identity and chosen direction to avoid direct political repercussions.

Finally, sport can be used by dictators to become an instrument of propaganda to support the regime (Babina, 2012: 107). The hosting of mega-events will provide an opportunity for the Belarusian regime to promote improved sporting infrastructure, such as the Minsk Arena, and, despite short term disapproval of hosting such events, this use of sport can provide the regime with a greater positive outlook in the long term. The desire to host global mega-events, and the heavy increase in sporting infrastructure and facilities, ensures sport is successfully used to

promote the regime, increase support for Lukashenka, and in doing so provide the regime with a greater chance of survival. The political agenda, and actions, of the Lukashenka regime confirms Grix (2012: 6) and Black & Peacock's (2011: 2210), theory that sport, and mega-events, is a key political and developmental priority for developing states as it will ensure regime survival.

The Belarusian regime is also consistently under geopolitical threat, and the authorities in Belarus will use sport to consolidate their power. Therefore, based on these factors, sport and regime survival will impact, and be witnessed in the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations in the follow manner. During a pro-Western stage of the cycle, we would expect regime survival to be built upon Western partnerships, a Western leaning identity, and increased public support through increased sporting infrastructure. During a pro-Russian stage of the cycle, regime survival would be built upon pro-Russian narratives within sporting events and statements and would look towards regime support for survival through associating the opposition with sporting failures in a crossover with Lukashenka's bio-politicisation process of protecting against threats.

4. Hypotheses, Research Design, and Data Selection

The core research question for this thesis is: how does the Belarusian regime, led by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, use sport for political ends? This is subsequently followed by the following secondary set of research questions which are: how does the Belarusian regime use sport to promote its political agenda in terms of forming international partnerships? In terms of its nation-building efforts? In terms of securing regime survival? And finally, how does the Belarusian regime use their politicisation of sport to signify the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations?

Based upon the theoretical framework presented in sections 2 and 3, these research questions can be supplemented with four hypotheses. The research questions can be answered, and the hypotheses examined, using comparative case study analysis and the analytical geopolitical code technique.

4.1 Hypotheses

The following core hypothesis (H1) and subsequent complementary hypotheses (H2-4) are set.

H1: As of 2021, the Belarusian regime has entered a new pro-Russian spell of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

H2: The Belarusian regime's approach to *international partnerships* is dependent upon the stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Eastern partnerships will be dominant during a pro-Russian stage of the cycle and Western partnerships will be dominant during a pro-Western stage of the cycle.

H3: The Belarusian regime's approach to the *nation-building process* is dependent upon the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. A Russkiy Mir identity will be expressed during a pro-Russian stage of the cycle and a Rzeczpospolita identity will be expressed during a pro-Western stage of the cycle.

H4: The Belarusian regime's approach to *ensuring regime survival* is dependent upon the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Survival is ensured through support of the Russian regime and the suppression of opposition during a pro-Russian stage of the cycle with survival

ensured through support of the EU economically and through increased public support during a pro-Western stage of the cycle.

4.2 Research Design

The core method for this thesis is a comparative case study analysis using two case studies which are the 2014, and 2021, IIHF Ice Hockey World Championships (IIHFWCs). The findings from the comparative analysis will be used to assess the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations and the impact the cycle holds on the political agenda of the Belarusian regime. Subsequently, the findings from the comparative analysis will be applied to the geopolitical codes techniques to gain a further understanding of the regime's changing geopolitical preferences.

4.2.1 Comparative Case Study Analysis

Comparative case study analysis is the mix of comparative analysis and the political science case study approach. Case studies form the basis of the analysis in an increasingly popular method amongst political scientists who study international relations (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999: 370). Case study research is often directed at identifying an underlying process (such as the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations), with the most appropriate use being for when the research questions are “how” or “why” questions (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1998: 374). Here, case studies can be defined as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a real-life context” (Simons, 2009: 21).

For the case studies, this thesis will use the ‘Interpretive’ approach, originally presented by Ljiphart (1971: 691), whereby a researcher uses a set of hypotheses to direct their examination of cases. Here, the purpose is to provide evidence of changes to, and effects on, organisations, institutions, actors, or state (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999: 374). Interpreted case studies will provide much of the empirical analysis (Nissen, 1998: 409), since the included comparative analysis can be used to further our understanding of the similarities, differences, and relationships between chosen case studies which without would see geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural phenomena go unaccounted for (Stafford, 2013: 2).

Goodrick (2014: 2) states this method is appropriate under the following circumstances. When how and why questions are being posed, when one or more interventions are being implemented across multiple contexts, when an understanding of the context is important in understanding the success or failure of an intervention, and when experimental designs are unfeasible for practical or ethical reasons. This thesis meets all these circumstances when the ‘intervention’ is considered as the actions and the political agenda of the Belarusian regime. Firstly, there is a “how” research question. Secondly, the intervention is applied across multiple, comparative events. Thirdly, context is important in understanding the intervention of the Belarusian regime and their actions, and finally, due to the political and ethical situation in Belarus, experimental research designs are not possible here due to a lack of existing data, and lack of primary research opportunities, as I further explain in section 8.4.

For a comparative case study analysis to be considered effective, specific features of each case should be noted prior to the study, with an understanding of each factor establishing the foundation for the analytical framework that will be used in the cross-case comparison and any extended synthesis (**Goodrick, 2014: 1**). As such, I will use the following features, under the provided definitions.

- **Background:** Historical context to selected case.
- **Political Context:** Political circumstances surrounding the selected case.
- **Political Agenda:** The Belarusian political agenda (as set out in Section 3) and its relation to, and effect upon, the events in selected case.
- **Politicisation of Sport:** Evidence of the politicisation of sport (following theories set out in Section 2) within, or due, to the selected case.
- **Aftermath and Impacts:** Consequences and subsequent actions of all actors involved in the selected case.

4.22 Geopolitical Codes

The synthesis of case studies does however extend beyond the comparison of similarities and differences to support propositions (Goodrick, 2014: 1). As such, whilst a comparative case study analysis can act as a method to test a set of hypotheses, they can also act as data for, and be further extended, through additional analytical techniques such as the geopolitical codes.

A geopolitical code is the way a country orientates itself to the world (Flint, 2021: 55), with Naji & Jawan (2011: 208-9) stating that geopolitical codes help to reveal the political elites' assumptions about a state's national interests, threat to interests, and a suitable response and justification, which form the states' foreign policy. For Flint & Taylor (2000: 21) geopolitical codes are a set of strategic assumptions about how a government forms its foreign policy which involve a single state's view of the world. To measure and define a country's geopolitical code, the following five assessments, as set out by Flint (2016: 52) must be used. The consequent outcomes will provide evidence to the geopolitical preference(s) of a state, or their choice of geopolitical world order (Flint & Taylor, 2007: 46).

- 1) Who are our current and potential allies?
- 2) Who are our current and potential enemies?
- 3) How can we maintain our allies and nurture potential allies?
- 4) How can we counter our current enemies and emerging threats?
- 5) How do we justify the four calculations to our public and to the global community?

These codes act as a stable framework for understanding the world, but they are capable of change, particularly if the assumptions, interests, and threats to a given state change (Rae, 2007: 20). Such changes when visible can provide detailed information about how a state may reassess, or alter, their geopolitical positioning. Since geopolitical codes can help to understand the changing actions of foreign political leaders, (Dijkink, 1998: 293), the technique becomes particularly useful for an assessment of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Dijkink (1998: 298) also suggests that when it comes to international relations and the geopolitical codes, that an international project, using case studies, would be most welcome.

Therefore, for this thesis, the geopolitical codes can be used to provide an overview of whether Belarus is experiencing strong Russian relations, or strong Western relations, and how this is represented through a specific sphere such as sport. Particularly seeing as political shifts represented in the politicisation of sport can be measured in terms of domestic, or foreign policy (Cha, 2009: 1597). Thus, this will ensure an answer can be provided to the core research question of how the regime using sport for political ends. In addition, the geopolitical codes will be able to indicate if whether the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations exists, and which stage of the cycle is present. This is important since the concept needs to be confirmed prior to any analysis of the impact of the political agenda.

Here, it should be noted that the questions for assessment previously set out by Flint (2016) are written from the perspective of a country considering their own geopolitical situations. This is since the geopolitical codes are a technique often used by governments in power. However, these will be slightly reworded when it comes to academic research purposes. As such, in my subsequent analysis the questions will be reworded based upon the research context, and therefore will be adapted to suit Belarus in a third person perspective, whereby Belarus refers to the Belarusian regime. Therefore, the questions for the geopolitical codes assessment in this thesis will be as follows:

- 1) Who is Belarus' current and potential allies?
- 2) Who is Belarus' current and potential enemies?
- 3) How can Belarus maintain their allies and nurture potential allies?
- 4) How can Belarus counter their current enemies and emerging threats?
- 5) How can Belarus justify the four calculations to their citizens and to the global community?

Prior to the calculations, Flint (2021: 55) has stated that we must first understand the global position, both politically and geographically, assets, challenges, aspirations, and historical legacies of the country at the centre of the study. I can confirm this has been completed for Belarus, and the Belarusian regime, within my theoretical framework in Section 3. Further, there are a multitude of ways in which political scientists can work to identify and even maintain and nurture the geopolitical relationships with a country's allies and potential allies, including diplomatic organisations, economic ties, and military operations amongst others (Flint, 2021: 56-58). Here, based upon the theory of the politicisation of sport, I would argue that sport can also be included as a possible identifier of geopolitical relationships. As such, the geopolitical code self-assessments are one of numerous possible research techniques in geopolitics, but one that I believe is most suitable to assess the use of sport in politics, the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations and the changing political agenda of the Belarusian regime.

4.3 Data Selection

The research model for this thesis had initially planned to structure the case studies and analysis around qualitative discourse drawn from public statements from Lukashenka and legislation of

the Republic of Belarus retrieved from president.gov.by, alongside reporting from state media and statistical data from the Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Belarus provided by Belstat.gov.by. Unfortunately, due to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the consequent sanctions placed upon the Belarus regime, these sources have since become largely inaccessible, and in some cases the Belarusian regime have also blocked access to Belarusian sources to those outside of the country.

As such, this thesis required an alternative data selection, rather than purely internal Belarusian data, from a more limited range of options. Consequently, the case studies for this thesis have been built upon a small amount of data from the initial model that is still publicly accessible in Finland and the UK. For these, it should be noted that sources listed in the list of references in either Belarusian or Russia, have been translated into English using the European Commission's eTranslation software. All other sources from a .by domain have been provided through an English version of the site. The data selection has also been updated to instead include primary data sources such as reporting on the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC from the IIHF and international broadcasters, statements from the EU and governments in Europe, visual discourse from both tournaments, existing business and economic data using Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), and secondary resources comprising of existing academic research including political opinion polls and surveys.

5. Case Study 1 – 2014 Ice Hockey World Championship (Minsk)

In May 2014, Belarus hosted the IIHF Ice Hockey World Championships in the most important sporting event in the sovereign history of the country (Tasman, 2014: 186). The tournament was considered a great success for Minsk as a new attendance record for the competition was achieved surpassing the record of 552,097 spectators at the 2004 tournament in the Czech Republic. A total of 640,044 spectators attended 64 games at the brand-new sporting complexes of Minsk Arena and Chizhovka Arena. Yet, prior to this, politicians across Europe had called upon the IIHF to strip Minsk of the hosting rights due to the authoritarian Belarusian regime's violation of human rights (Tasman, 2011: 202). The IIHF refused to do so on the basis that the organisation does not discriminate on political grounds. But, whilst the IIHF had no intention of politicising the tournament, the Belarusian regime did.

Background

Only since 1991 has Belarus seen significant ice hockey achievements in terms of tournament performance and infrastructure. Belarus' most impressive ice hockey achievement was a 4th placed finished in the 2002 Winter Olympics which included a 4-3 victory over tournament favourites Sweden in a match dubbed as Miracle on Ice 2 (Robson, 2015). Four years later Belarus gained their highest placing in an IIHF World Championship by finishing in sixth place.

The sporting achievements of the Belarus national team in the 2000s coincided with a strong material development of the sport in the country. Before independence, there was only three indoor ice rinks but by 2014, there would be thirty ice arenas (Ioffe & Silitski, 2018: 173). This significant development ensured that in May 2009, the BIHA acquired the rights to host the 2014 IIHFWC in Minsk. Although, this was also largely due to the proverbial balance of power Russia held during the voting process (Browarczyk, 2012). The outcome of the bidding process was described by Sergei Gontcharov, the General Secretary of the BIHA, as the “the best day in the history of Belarusian hockey, maybe the best day in Belarus sports altogether”, whilst Vadimir Naumov, the BIHA Chairman, stated “hosting the championship will not only boost the national economy, but also take Belarusian ice hockey to a whole new level...our devoted fans are eager to see their idols with their own eyes to admire, learn, adopt the best traditions and lay a sound foundation for future victories” (Merk, 2009).

These statements provided initial indications of why the regime had supported the bid, as, at a time of economic difficulties, hosting the IIHFWC would “boost the national economy”. This statement immediately confirms the existing theory that there is a belief amongst political figures that hosting mega-events can provide economic benefits for the state. Further, by stating that fans could adopt best traditions, they provided an initial indication that the tournament would be used for nation-building, something that the Ice Hockey World Championships have often been used for (Coolman, 2010: 42). This was also visible in the choice of tournament slogan “the young hockey country”. A slogan with an underlying message that Belarus has newly emerging people who are about to present who they are to the world.

Initial responses by the Belarusian authorities appeared to show that the tournament would be politicised. This led to many countries and opposition groups expressing reservations about awarding the hosting right to Belarus, and even more so following the repressions and imprisonment of political prisoners after elections in 2010 (Marples, 2012). For example, the ‘No to Minsk 2014’ campaign, who appealed to the IIHF President, Rene Fasel, by stating “don’t play with the dictator” and to support the victims of human rights violations by removing the 2014 IIHFWC from Belarus instead of allowing Lukashenka to shed a positive light on himself and his regime (Ursu & Hosa, 2012).

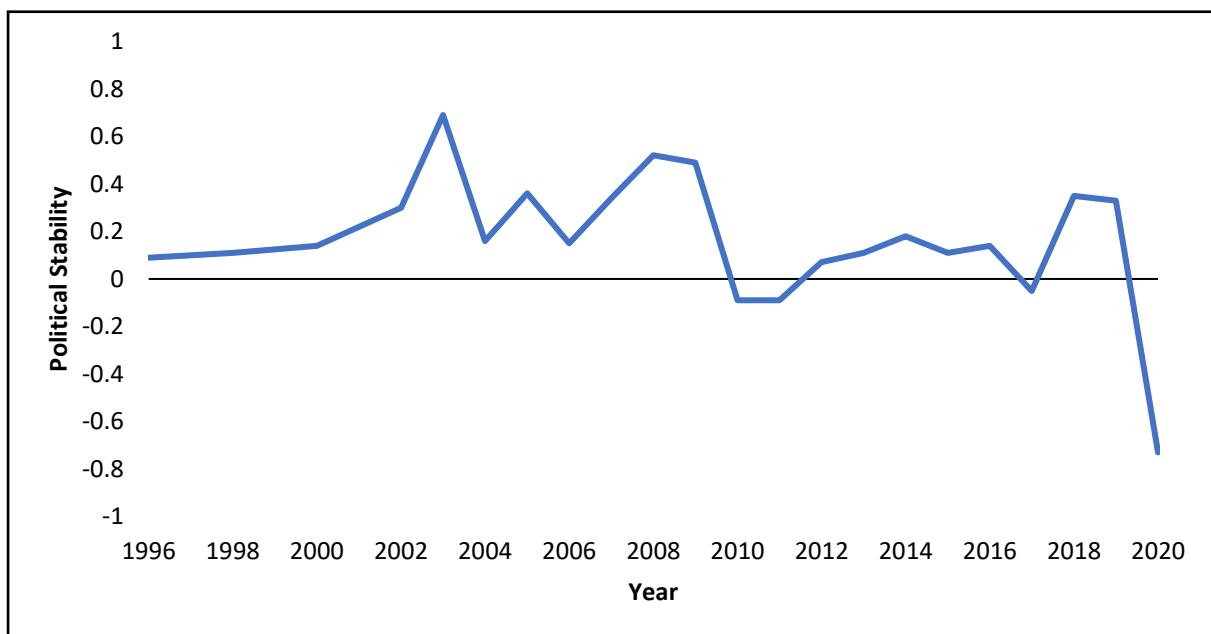
Political Context

Whilst it was well known that the regime sought the tournament for economic purposes, there are other political indicators that suggest why they had such a strong desire to become the hosts during the bidding in 2009, despite three previous failed attempts. For example, the Political Stability Index that measures perceptions of the chances that a government will be destabilised or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means (Alesina & Perotti, 1996: 1206). The Political Stability Index is measured on a scale of -2.5 to 2.5 points and if the measurements fall below 0 then the regime is at risk. Here, it should be noted that even the year-on-year changes in political stability for a regime have been small (as has been the case for the Belarusian regime), the difference between being classed as stable and strong (represented by a positive figure), or unstable and weak (represented by a negative figure) can be vital when it comes to the narrative surrounding regime survival.

As shown in Figure 1, the regime fell into negative political stability for the first time during 2009 and was considered at risk of collapse. With a score of -0.09 points by the end of the 2009, the Belarusian regime was ranked 107th out of 194 countries worldwide for political

stability, below other post-Soviet states such as Ukraine (0.01, 100th), Latvia (0.53, 66th), Estonia (0.66, 59th), and Lithuania (0.72, 52nd) (WGI, 2021). But as discussed, mega-events may help increase political stability and a regime’s chance of survival. The Minsk bid coincided with a recent continuous fall in political stability and based on the data, there is an indication that the regime may have been looking at the 2014 IIHFWC as an opportunity to overcome the risk of collapse, through the consequent benefits that hosting a mega-event can bring to the political, economic, and societal landscape of a country.

Figure 1: Political Stability Index for Belarus (-2.5 weak; 2.5 strong)



Source: WGI 2021, own creation.

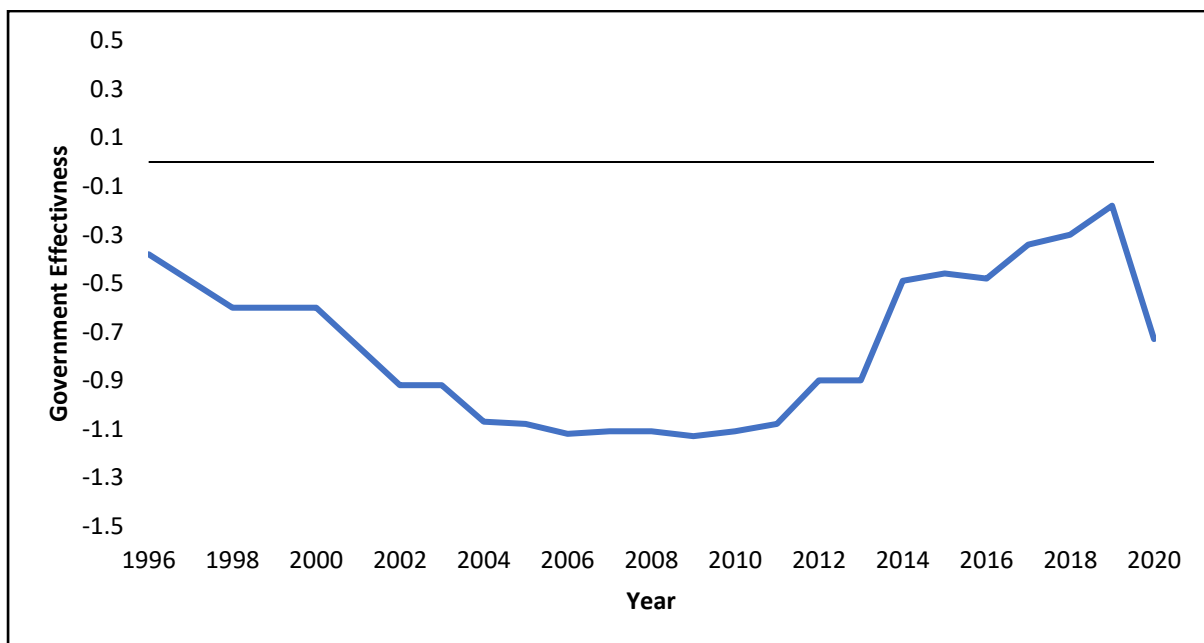
Similarly, the government effectiveness index, which measures perceptions of the quality of public services, the degree of independence of the civil service, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the government’s credibility (Garcia-Sanchez et al, 2013: 573), may also provide an indication to why the regime held such a desire to bid for the games in 2009. This index is also measured on a -2.5 to 2.5, weak to strong points scale, with any country recording a positive score being considered to have an effective government, whilst any country with a negative score being considered to have an ineffective government.

As shown in Figure 2, whilst always being deemed ineffective, the Belarusian regime had reached a new low prior to the tournament bid with -1.13 points, and such a level of

ineffectiveness would prevent them from proceeding with formulating and implementing their political agenda. This score was considerably lower than the 2009 global average of -0.02, and saw Belarus ranked 172/192 countries for government effectiveness, the lowest of any state in Europe, and second lowest of the post-Soviet states with Turkmenistan being the only other former Soviet state to record a lower score at -1.45 (WGI, 2021). For comparison and context, Russia, and the Russian regime who Lukashenka would soon be hoping to reduce dependency upon, was ranked 108/192 with a score of -0.41

This was part of a long-term trend that the Belarusian regime had been actively wanting to change, particularly due to comparison to the global scores and trends, and as such, the bid may have also been used to divert the regime’s low, stagnating effectiveness. Although, similarly to political stability, it should be noted that government effectiveness, which is operationalised on perception rather than actual effectiveness, will also be impacted through a range of factors outside of the mega-event publicity trick. But, the consequent benefits, and increase in public support, that a mega-event brings, can help increase the government effectiveness index for the Belarusian regime.

Figure 2: Government Effectiveness Index for Belarus (-2.5 weak; 2.5 strong)



Source: WGI 2021, own creation.

Come 2014, further political contexts would determine the extent to which the regime politicised the tournament. Most importantly, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014

had a considerable shock on Belarus which greatly affected their foreign policy (Kostyugova & Pankovsky, 2015: 7). This resulted in the Belarusian regime re-igniting the country's engagement with the EU, which was reflected in the regime's shift in domestic economic and soft-Belarusianisation policies (Kostyugova & Pankovsky, 2015: 7). Economically, the depreciation of the Russian rouble meant Belarus' exports dropped, GDP growth slowed, and the national currency lost value. In response, Belarus began to seek to expand its dialogue with the EU to find support (Kostyugova & Pankovsky, 2015: 8). The 2014 IIHFWC would provide the regime with an opportunity to expand this dialogue through sports and manoeuvre themselves towards the West politically with their newfound stability and effectiveness.

The tournament provided a useful opportunity for the regime to present a new image of Belarus, raising the attractiveness of the country for investors, economic support, and tourists. But most importantly, there was an opportunity to increase relations with several Western states (Tetlak, 2016: 166). After having so much dependency on the proverbial balance of Russian support within the IIHF to ensure Minsk was selected as the host for the tournament, the political context around the tournament ensured that the Belarusian regime would politicise the tournament to signify a shift away from Russia and toward a pro-Western stage of relations within their political agenda.

Political Agenda

The 2014 IIHFWC was used as an opportunity for the regime to develop new international partnerships. This was made clear by Lukashenka at the start of the tournament on May 9, a date specifically chosen to coincide with Victory Day which is a significant nodal point for Belarusian and Soviet history (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 88). During his opening ceremony speech, Lukashenka provided a clear political message calling for an end to division and deteriorating relations with the West, particularly the USA (Rojo-Labaien et al, 2020). This was a sign that these games were meant to help Belarus create new allies, rather than enemies. In his speech Lukashenka stated:

“Today we celebrate a special day. It is called Victory Day. In that brutal war, we fought together with the United States, we were on the same side. We fought together against Nazism. On this ice, we will be separated by this red line. I pray to God that we are separated by lines only in sport” (Gov.by, 9 May 2014).

To ensure the country and the regime had the capabilities to create unity and provide an opportunity to develop new international partnerships, they focused upon increased levels of

tourism and increased foreign language capabilities. For example, to encourage a higher level of tourism the regime focused on infrastructure development and visa policies (Lukievic, 2014: 107).

Belarus has historically applied a strict visa policy that has made it difficult for foreign tourists to visit the country, with the year leading up to the tournament seeing Belarus' lowest number of foreign tourists since 2004 as later shown in Figure 7. However, this strict visa policy was removed for the duration of the tournament to allow more visitors to come to Minsk (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 81). Therefore, hosting a mega-event provided the country with a great opportunity to improve their global image, reputation, and diplomatic ties (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 92). Lukashenka stated in the build up to the tournament that for the first time, the Belarusian regime would "completely open their country to the foreigners" and that tourists would enjoy a modernised country (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 92). In replacement of a visa, tourists were only required to show a valid match ticket when entering the country. The scheme worked with visitors arriving from all over the world. In total 60,000 foreigners took advantage of this visa free scheme with over 10,000 tourists arriving from Lithuania, 4,000 from Latvia, 2,000 from Finland, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, and impressively, 400 US tourists and 300 Canadian tourists (Tasman, 2014: 187).

The increased openness for interaction with new partners and countries also had a spillover effect onto citizens. For a country whose citizens had for so long had limited communication and ties with the West, Belarusian citizens could freely interact with the tourists from Europe and North America. This showed that communication and the formation of partners was easier without visa and other diplomatic barriers (Tasman, 2014: 188). Attracting tourists in this manner was desired by all aspects of Belarusian civil society including the regime, the media, the opposition, and citizens. Some hoped for a normalisation of the country's image by receiving more European tourists, and others hoped that the more foreign tourists that came to Belarus, the more intense contacts and partnerships Belarus would hold with foreigners who could help the country change (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 92).

To coincide with the increased tourism, the Belarusian regime provided over \$1 billion of much needed investment to local infrastructure. This included expansion of international highways, additional metro stations in Minsk, and the addition of a commuter train service (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 93). Besides transport, there was also the restoration of abandoned neighbourhoods and modernising of housing across the city. The regime also saw the

opportunity to use the tournament to ensure future diplomatic trips to and from Belarus would become more accessible, ensuring that the development of new global partnerships could be maintained (Belarus.by, 2014).

To further increase the ability of Belarus to form new international partnerships during the tournament, the regime increased the English language skills of government officials and volunteers (BeITA, 25 April 2014). There was over 1000 English speaking volunteers, although thousands more applied, and even the military was provided with basic English lessons (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 93). The high number of applicants created an impression that the nation was eager to host the tournament, despite disapproval when the bid was originally awarded (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 93). The regime hoped that increased English capabilities would help make communication and diplomacy with other countries more feasible.

Language was also at the centre of the Belarusian regime's attempt to use the tournament as to promote Belarus' nation-building. During the tournament there was a massive revival of the Belarusian language, rather than the much more commonly spoken Russian language. After years of legislating to ensure Russian was the primary language in Belarus, Lukashenka began to convert to speaking in Belarusian for the first time in 2014 (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 88). The regime used the IIHFWC as an opportunity to revive and promote the Belarusian language, with Lukashenka embracing the Belarusian language for the first time since 1994 (Dynko & Bigg, 2014). For example, during the preparations for the tournament all new information signs were in Belarusian and English (Basik & Rahautsou, 2019: 115). A similar situation occurred for the tournament's two official slogans, "enjoy the moment together" and "together we celebrate!", which were primarily presented in Belarusian (Pankavec, 2014).

There was a large attempt throughout the tournament to replace Russian with Belarusian as much as possible. This occurred not just only with the spoken languages, but also in commercialisation terms. To ensure that Belarus could be presented as an independent identity, the regime issued a Resolution (No.365) advising that many Russian products should be replaced with Belarusian produce. For example, prior to the tournament the regime instructed all shops, cafes, bars, and restaurants to sell only Belarusian beer for the duration of the tournament (Preiherman, 2014). The regime saw this as a way of supporting local breweries and the local economy, thus improving public opinion on the hosting of the tournament as well as personal economic situations.

Table 1: Beer Production (millions of litres) in Belarus 2012-2015

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015
Amount	426	422	431	404.6

Source: Kseniya (2018: 36), own creation.

Table 1 shows that the impact of Resolution 365 did have a positive effect on Belarusian breweries in 2014 with an increase in the amount of beer produced in the country. The increased production led to a long-term positive impact on brand recognition which would establish a Belarusian identity and support nation-building. Prior to the tournament, Belarusian beer was rarely exported outside neighbouring Lithuania and Russia (Sorainen, 2013). However, by 2020 Belarusian beer was regularly exported to 20 different locations as shown in Figure 3. This included many liberal, Western countries outside of their traditional post-Soviet export market including major ice hockey countries such as the USA and Germany who had fans attend the tournament. This suggests that an attempt to increase recognition of Belarus through promoting Belarusian brands that were first presented to the world during the tournament, has continued in the long term. Figure 3 also provides an indication of more positive long-term economic impacts as the tournament did provide a chance for Belarus to enter new markets and attract new investors and trade partners.

Figure 3: Receiving Locations of Exported Belarusian Beer in 2020



Own creation.

Not only did the use of language and produce represent an ethnic Belarusian history and identity, but Volat, the official tournament mascot, did too. The name Volat, which symbolises strength, courage, and power in the Belarusian language, was chosen as part of a national contest in which 10,000 people participated (UK MFA, 2014). It was stated that the name should reflect the characteristics of national culture, evoke bright and positive associations, and demonstrate Belarus' power and strength. According to historical assessments, Volat originates in Eastern Slavic mythology and was a strong warrior who lived on Belarusian soil (Cvetkoff, 2012). The regime's choice of imagery, as shown in Figure 4, was supposed to link Belarusian and Eastern Slavic mythology with performativity in ice hockey (Nizhnikau & Alviri, 2016: 88).

Figure 4: Volat – Official Mascot of Minsk 2014



Retrieved from: IIHF, 3 September 2013.

Whilst a mascot based upon historical culture would resonate with the Belarusian public, there was also a politicisation of the design of the mascot. Volat was pictured in a green, white, and red hockey kit, which have been the traditional state colours of Belarus since 1995. This was in line with all symbols of the tournament being depicted in state colours only (Nizhnikau & Alviri, 2016: 87). As such, the only nation-building signifiers that were allowed had to represent the official state and left limited room for other nation-building movements or

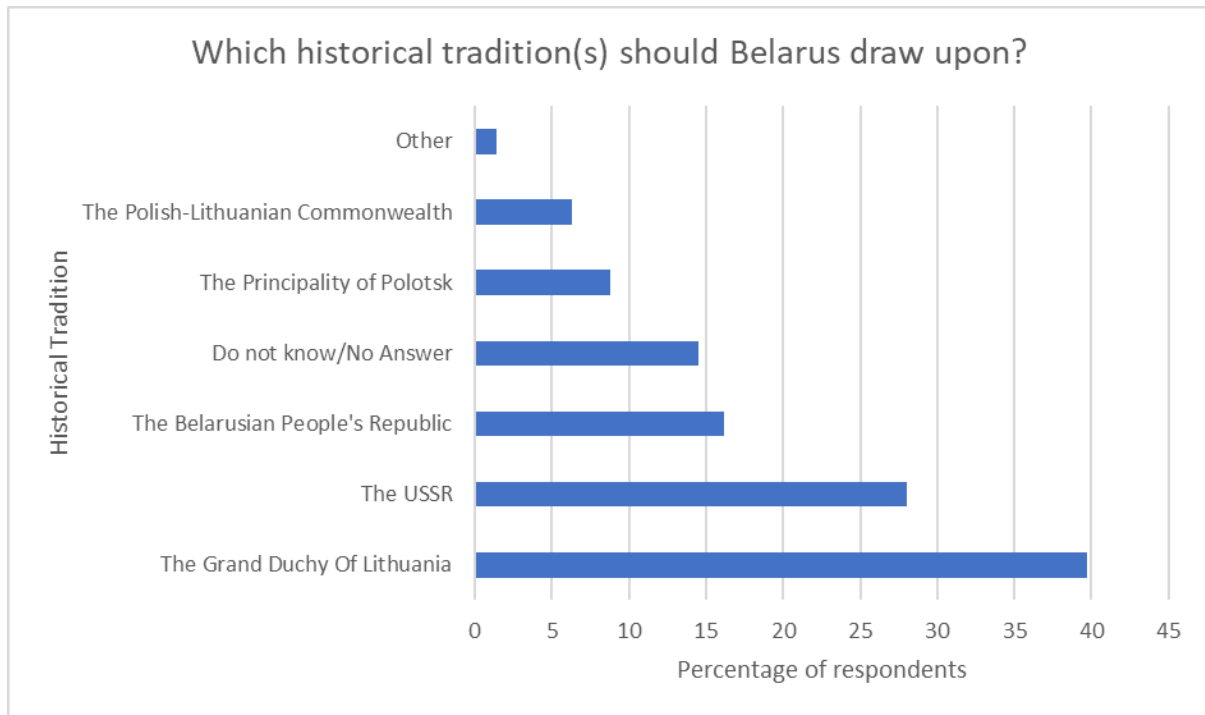
symbols. This included narratives that centered around the Russkiy Mir, with any reference to Russia being carefully monitored or avoided (Nizhnikau & Alviri, 2016: 93).

The regime chose to host a national competition to select the mascot's name with the aim of strengthening popular support through the symbolic participation of the public (Nizhnikau & Alviri, 2016: 88). Volat relates back to national culture and mythology that was popular during the period when Belarusian grounds were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It should have been no surprise that a name based on these roots were chosen because, as shown in Figure 4, nearly 40% of Belarusians believe that the country should draw upon historical traditions from the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Still, it was surprising to see the regime adopt a more Western leaning tradition for the tournament, which had previously shown early signs of promoting Soviet heritage.

Attempts to use the 2014 IIHFWC to gain public support was also how the regime intended to ensure regime survival and strengthen Lukashenka's personal power. The attempts to unite people around Belarusian nation-building increased the public support of the regime, but the economic investments, and how they were used to help encourage new diplomatic partnerships, also brought public support.

Public opinion data and employment figures can provide an insight of how this public support was provided through economic means. For example, prior to the tournament as shown in Figure 5, 72.9% of Belarusians believed that the main factor determining the choice of Belarus' allies should be if they can improve the economic situation of the country. As such, it is likely that Belarusian citizens would have supported the regime's attempts to use the tournament to create new allies that could help improve the economic situation in the country. Further, the tournament was used as a means of generating employment in Minsk through an expansion in tourism and the transformation of the city centre, including new construction sites and retail facilities, that would bring more jobs to the city.

Figure 5: Which historical tradition(s) should Belarus draw upon?



Source: OSW, 2020. Own creation.

As shown in Table 2, this desired affect was seen as levels of unemployment consistently fell before the start of the tournament compared with record high levels in 2009 prior to bid acquisition. This ensured the regime gained more public support and overturned the disapproval of citizens who believed employment and the wider economy should have been the regime’s priority in 2009 rather than the state priority which was hosting the 2014 IIHFWC (Babina, 2012: 104). However, it should be noted that unemployment began to rise following the tournament. This led to questions as to whether the benefits from acquiring the hosting rights would only be short term.

Table 2: Unemployment in Belarus 2009-2014

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Unemployment (1000s)	40.3	33.1	28.2	24.9	20.9	22.7
Unemployment Level (%)	0.9	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5

Source: Belsat 2014/Mikhail Belokon, own creation.

The chances of regime survival were also increased through the nation-building process to suit the changing views of the Belarusian people. However, in a tactic taken from the Soviet Playbook on the politicisation of sport, regime survival was also ensured through a crackdown on potential protestors as the regime refused to allow any criticisms to be heard. For example, several opposition figures were arrested before the tournament began and sentenced to 15-20 days in prison (Preiherman, 2014). Some of those who were arrested stated that “the cleansings in Minsk were no less severe than the ones during the 1980 Moscow Olympics” (Dziemidzienka, 2014). Although, citizens would not have heard this reported in the state-controlled media who remained silent on such crackdowns as they focused on keeping unwanted people away from the tournament to ensure no demonstrations could damage the image of the regime that Lukashenka wanted to portray.

Alongside attempts to prevent scenes of discontent, the regime also tried to distort from real events to prevent public disapproval. For example, during the opening ceremony, there had been reports of Lukashenka’s speech being booed by spectators. The opposition news source, Charter 97, stated that the live broadcast was interrupted by silence when it became clear that spectators did not approve of Lukashenka’s words. Consequently, the state TV removed the background sound. Spectators watching the ceremony on TV believed the TV company amended the sound so “viewers could not hear the reaction of the audience at the Minsk Arena” (Charter 97, 13 May 2014).

A similar distorting narrative occurred with the description of the scenes which followed Russia’s 5-2 victory over Finland in the final. Up to 25,000 Russian supporters, including a visit from Vladimir Putin, were seen celebrating on the streets of Minsk much to the disgust of many residents (Preiherman, 2014). Not only would this risk losing public support, but the scene would go against the new pro-Western, pro-European image that the regime had been promoting throughout the tournament. To try and portray the large crowds in a positive manner, state media presented the celebrations as an example of the “European Spirit” coming to Belarus (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 91), despite the fact these fans were Russian and that most European spectators had already left Minsk.

Politicisation of Sport

All actions and decisions towards the 2014 IIHFWC taken by the regime had political motives in line with the theory behind the politicisation of sport. Power for change was confirmed through the rebuild of existing Soviet architecture that without the lure of the tournament would

likely never have been re-developed. The external political pressure of hosting the tournament also ensured the illiberal regime adopted some liberal manners, although briefly, through a more open visa policy. Further international pressure also ensured the Belarusian regime passed legal reforms to open its markets, increase democratic tolerance, and reduce inequalities in the country (Rojo-Labien et al, 2020). Similar measures ensured sporting diplomacy was achieved and used to engage, inform, and create a favourable image of Belarus and to shift foreign policy perceptions. Further soft power techniques were seen throughout the tournament with the ban on the sale of foreign beer. Whilst the ban was propagandist, the promotion of Belarusian beer provided a platform to promote an individual Belarusian identity. Here the Belarusian regime was using sport to re-imagine their community, and their identity. This was further confirmed by the choice to use the Belarusian language at the tournament where sport was used as a testing ground for a shift away from the more commonly spoken Russian language.

These approaches resulted in major criticism from opposition leaders and campaign groups. For example, Andrei Sannikov, the leader of civic campaign European Belarus, in an open letter to Rene Fasel and the IIHF called the event “the most shameful competition in the history of ice hockey” (Sannikov, 2014). Yet, in response, Fasel described the tournament as “a great show” and thanked the BNOG for overcoming “the many challenges of hosting a World Championship” before stating that he was impressed with Belarus on and off the ice (Fasel, 2014: 1).

It is hard to tell whether Fasel believed the games to be a success *because of* the politicisation of the tournament, or *despite the* politicisation of the tournament. Either way, Fasel and the IIHF came under even further criticism following the tournament. Martin Ugglå, a Swedish activist who was also arrested prior to the tournament by Belarusian authorities, stated that the decision to proceed with tournament “was aimed at raising the popularity of the authoritarian regimes” and that the tournament was used for propaganda. Ugglå also raised questions about the politics of the IIHF stating that “the IIHF lack transparency, so it is hard to control how decisions are made and the real reasons behind them” (Ugglå, 2015). Indications were made that the politicisation of the tournament may have also included the Belarusian regime influencing Fasel behind the scenes to ensure the tournament and the regime would not receive any criticism from the IIHF. Such suggestions were further raised when Lukashenka signed a decree on September 4th, 2014, personally awarding Fasel with the “Order of peoples’ Friendship”, a major award from the Belarusian state (Charter 97, 5 September 2014).

Regardless of these views, Lukashenka will have seen the politicisation of the tournament as a great success. The Belarusian regime had entered the field of sporting diplomacy by using mega-events for cultural, economic, and political desires that can strengthen a national identity, boost the economy, but also to strengthen Belarus' geopolitical position (Rojo-Labaien et al, 2020).

Aftermath and Impact

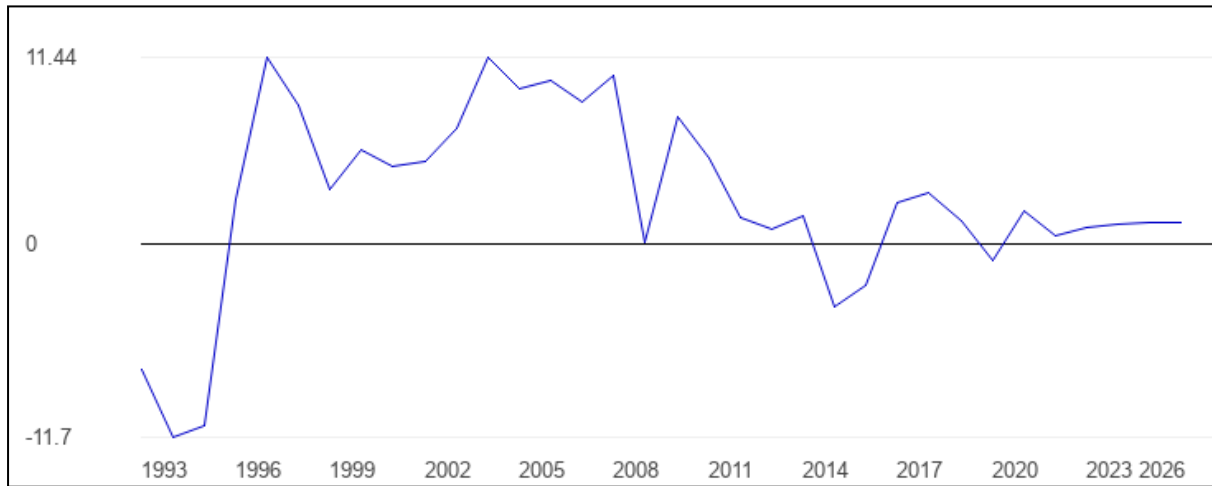
Immediate reactions would suggest that the tournament had a positive effect on the regime. As between February and August 2014, Lukashenka's approval rating rose from 31.9% to 42.3%, providing Lukashenka with his highest approval rating in over three years. Whilst this would have been influenced by the crisis in Ukraine, Lukashenka had also been commended for bringing greater stability and less dependency on, and support for, Russia (Barushka, 2014). Both, however, will have also been impacted through the politicisation methods of the 2014 IIHFWC.

Consequently, this would not be the Belarusian regime's only attempt at hosting a mega-event. More recently, there were plans for a joint Belarus-Ukraine Olympic bid and for Belarus to host games at Euro 2020, before Minsk did host another mega-event with the 2019 European Games. But most famous of all, Minsk also acquired the hosting rights for the 2021 IIHFWC. An indication that despite all the political criticism the 2014 tournament gained, Minsk had the infrastructure, plans and trust to continue hosting mega-events. This was further emphasised when other mega-events held around Europe shortly after the 2014 IIHFWC adopted similar techniques and approaches. For example, Russia during the 2018 FIFA World Cup and all host nations during Euro 2020 also removed visas for those who held match tickets (Tetlak, 2016: 163).

All these mentioned events, intended to build upon Belarus' newfound relations with the European partners. This shows that the increased movement towards the West that was portrayed during the 2014 IIHFWC has continued for the Belarusian regime. The newfound relations with the West also led to further economic investment and support, including from the EU. The impact of this was clear, with Belarus' new settings leading to a peculiar position whereby they are heading towards a neoliberal economy, but with a government that continues to portray authoritarian traits (Rojo-Labaien et al, 2020). Unfortunately, in terms of the impact of economic benefits as a direct result of the tournament, there are no exact figures provided by the Belarusian regime on whether Minsk as a city made a profit (Tasman, 2014: 188).

However, as shown in Figure 6, there was a sustained increase in the IMF forecast on economic growth for the first time since 1996.

Figure 6: Belarus IMF Economic Growth (% of GDP) Forecast 1992-2026

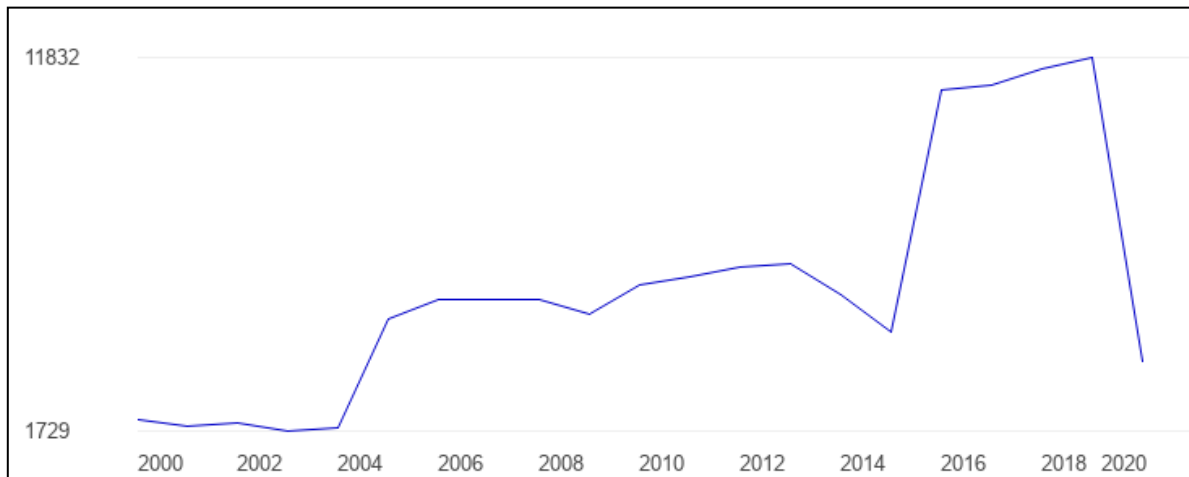


Retrieved from: GlobalEconomy.com

There have also been more openings towards the West following the success of the no-visa policy. Despite the 2014 tournament not resulting in a positive rise in overall numbers in that year, the tournament did allow easier access to a new set of tourists from the West due to the change in visa policy. Consequently, with a desire for more Western tourists, Belarus made their entire visa policy less restrictive in 2017 when the government approved visa free entry for five days to maintain, and increase, visitor numbers (Rojo-Labaien et al, 2021).

Figure 7 shows how following the initial 2014 visa policy, tourist numbers in Belarus rose greatly following the formation of the permanent five-day visa-free policy, and due to the increased tourist infrastructure, the regime has managed to ensure tourism levels remain high and that Belarus is open to visitors from around the world. Consequently, these impacts helped support the Belarusian regime to move forward with their ambitions for a Belarus-EU Visa Free Regime (Mosneaga & Mosneaga, 2019: 108).

Figure 7: Number of Tourist Arrivals in Belarus 2000-2020 (1000's tourists per year)



Retrieved from: GlobalEconomy.com

The impact and the aftermath of Belarusian nation-building included the sustained shift away from association with the *Russkiy Mir* and instead, there was an increase in reference to the even more historical *Rzeczpospolita* era and a wider use of the Belarusian language. The increase in domestic signs in Belarusian, alongside the increased knowledge of the language, resulted in an increase in the number of Belarusian speakers and a reduction in the number of Russian speakers in the country (Barushka, 2015). Shortly after the tournament, Lukashenka himself even gave a full Presidential speech in the Belarusian language for the first time in nearly 20 years despite previously suggesting that Belarusian was an “inferior language” (Dynko & Bigg, 2014). In addition, following the tournament, pro-Western and anti-Soviet views and identity became stronger amongst the Belarusian people. This impact may be as a direct result of the increased contact Belarusians had with Western foreigners during the tournament and the connections that had been kept (Marples, 2012).

Overall, the success of the tournament benefited the Belarusian regime in their attempt to ensure survival. As shown in Figure 1, after a slight increase following acquisition of the hosting rights, the regime became unstable again in 2013. However, following the tournament the regime saw an increase in political stability for the next four years. Whilst the data for the political stability index is limited in showing cause and effect of different factors on political stability, through the increase in public support of the regime, it appears that the tournament helped increase the political stability of the regime, thus reducing the risk of a revolution or a regime collapse.

Importantly, with their positive political stability index, the Belarusian regime now ranked 88/194 worldwide in 2015, and whilst still being deemed less stable than fellow pro-Western post-Soviet states, the Belarusian regime was deemed much more stable than their Russian counterparts who scored -1.03 (166th globally) (WGI, 2021). This would be vital in Lukashenka's attempts to reduce dependency on Russia, as with these scores, Lukashenka could now argue that the Russian regime is in political decline and could no longer support the interests of, or bring stability to, Belarus.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 2, government effectiveness also increased greatly following the tournament, again whilst the data is limited in showed specific effects, it appears the government's successful economic commitments, and increase in public services (i.e., transport), has allowed government effectiveness to improve. Within a year of the tournament, Belarus saw its government effectiveness score increase to -0.46 points, as the country rose to 117/192 worldwide, above multiple post-Soviet states, and three European states (WGI, 2021). After years of decline and stagnation, the acquisition brought a slight increase, but, following the tournament, there was a positive impact on government effectiveness with a much larger and sustained increase. Whilst Belarus still scored lower than the European post-Soviet states, the increase in effectiveness was a starting block for the Belarusian regime which would allow them to being to increase the regime's legitimacy and ability to form international partnerships and proceed with implementation of their nation-building policy.

In the aftermath of the 2014 IIHFWC, there was positive impacts for the regime, which would allow them to meet their political agenda. However, the biggest impact of all was how the regime acknowledged the success and opportunities that their politicisation of sport can bring and, as such, the aftermath of the tournament would see a much greater level of politicisation in sport and a continued use of mega-events.

6. Case Study 2 – 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship (Minsk/Riga)

In 2017, the Belarusian regime submitted a bid to host the IIHFWC again in 2021 as a co-host alongside Latvia. The bid was submitted under the slogan “Passion. No Borders”, intending to represent unity between Belarus and its fellow post-Soviet states, and also to promote the Belarusian regime’s positive relations with the EU (Merk, 2020). However, following political unrest in Belarus, the IIHF decided to remove Minsk as a co-host of the tournament in January 2021 due to “safety and security issues that are beyond the IIHF’s control” (Steiss, 2021a). Lukashenka’s regime did not take the decision lightly and began a heavy campaign against the decision and the IIHF. Consequently, the tournament became overshadowed with an anti-Western, pro-Russian narrative from Lukashenka in which increased levels of authoritarianism, and a shift in political relations towards Russia, were on display.

Background

The Minsk-Riga bid was always in a strong position to acquire the hosting rights for the 2021 IIHFWC with the bid presentation recalling the atmosphere from 2014 and the practicality of the arenas being close to the city centre, and easily accessible through the modern transport infrastructure. The BIHA secretary, Yaraslau Zauhaordni, also acknowledged some of the criticisms from the last tournament and stated that “we learnt a lot from organising the 2014 World Championship in Minsk and with that experience can make things even better in 2021” (Etchells, 2017). However, whilst lessons would be learnt, the bid did not include any new sporting complexes or major infrastructural developments as had been the case in 2014.

Consequently, this tournament would not be politicised around economic needs. Instead, this tournament initially saw increased politicisation around the Belarusian regime’s positive relationship with Western partners. As such, the original Belarusian bid asked Latvia to co-host the tournament, to which former Latvian Prime Minister and President of the LHF, Aigars Kalvitis, agreed stating, “hockey is loved so much in our country and we are thankful that our Belarusian friends invited us” (Etchells, 2017). The use of the word ‘friends’ signified the close unity the neighbouring countries held. From a political perspective, the Belarusian regime were convinced that their joint bid could be used to further promote their stage of pro-Western geopolitics (Merk, 2020).

Up until 2020, the background to the tournament was built upon the concept of unity between Belarus and their Western EU neighbour in a sign of post-Soviet unity against Russian

dependency and influence. This was specifically shown through Spiky the tournament mascot which drew upon traditional Latvian and Belarusian mythology in a sign their shared relationship and history (IIHF, 2020). Here, the BNOB also stated that Spiky (shown in Figure 8) characterised the embodiment of the unity between the two nationalities (Kostyuchenko, 2020).

Figure 8: Spiky the Hedgehog – Official Mascot of the 2021 IIHF World Championship



Retrieved from: IIHF (2020)

However, following the election in 2020, the Lukashenka regime increased its levels of authoritarianism, and the IIHF came under mounting pressure from opponents, included co-hosts Latvia and the European Parliament, to strip Belarus of its co-hosting right amid a violent crackdown on opposition protestors by the Belarusian regime (Crane, 2020). German MEP Sabine Verheyen, who chairs the EP committee that is responsible for sport, emphasised that “it is important that sport sends a message that it will not be associated with dictators and regimes which clamp down brutally on demonstrators, opposition politicians and the civilian population” (Crane, 2020). Yet, the IIHF still insisted that it would be too difficult to move the championship away from Minsk with Rene Fasel emphasising that “the IIHF cannot move a tournament for political reasons” (Crane, 2020). This pressure peaked when three tournament sponsors, Skoda, Nivea and Liqui Moly, said they would cancel their involvement if Minsk was allowed to remain as a host (TSN, 18 January 2021).

Eventually, the 2021 IIHFWC was pulled from Belarus. The IIHF did however disguise their political decision under the phrase “safety concern” (Andzans & Berzina-Cerenkova, 2021:

322), with the IIHF stating that it would be impossible to ensure the welfare of teams, spectators, and officials in Belarus. This is despite Fasel's continued attempts to keep the tournament in Minsk claiming that it could build bridges between the opposition and Lukashenka (TSN, 18 January 2021). Yet, the Belarusian opposition welcomed the decision with Tsikhanouskaya stating that "it is a victory because there will not be an extra wave of repression for the sake of cleansing the city before the World Championship...it is a victory because Lukashenka did not manage to make it look as if he has everything under control" (TSN, 18 January 2021). Lukashenka consequently engaged with opportunist propaganda, blaming the opposition for the removal of the tournament, and considering the IIHF as part of a corrupt Western movement against his regime.

Political Context

As shown in the Political Stability Index in Figure 1, the Belarusian regime had fallen back into a negative stability score in 2017 and was now deemed as unstable and at risk of collapse. In comparison globally, the Belarusian political stability index was now below the global average and Belarus had fallen in its global ranking to 102nd (WGI, 2021). Therefore, following the rise in political stability following the 2014 IIHFWC, the Belarusian regime appeared to believe that hosting the tournament again would bring the same results.

However, in 2017 government effectiveness did not correlate with political stability, as was the case in 2009. As shown in Figure 2, at the time of the bid government effectiveness was at an all-time high, although still classed as ineffective. Belarus ranked 115/192 globally, compared to 172/192 at the previous bid acquisition in 2009 (WGI, 2021). However, in keeping with their opportunist approach, the regime is likely to have utilised the 2021 IIHFWC bid to build on their growing momentum. Furthermore, the Belarusian economic condition would have been considered, as the Belarusian economic growth estimate, which had climbed following the 2014 event, had dropped into a negative projection by 2017, as illustrated in Figure 6. The Belarusian regime had managed to survive for a short time by "kicking the economic can down the road", but mistakes were being made under increasing financial pressure (Wilson, 2021: 266).

The political context at the time of bid, and for much of the build-up to the tournament, centered around the Belarusian regimes pro-Western relations and the removal of EU sanctions that had taken place in 2016 (Wilson, 2021: 267). Belarus' foreign policy stance under Lukashenka had seen the country improve relations on both sides of geopolitical cycles, particularly with the

EU. The Belarusian regime saw this as their new brand, which they were eager to market (Wilson, 2021: 268-9). The 2021 IIHFWC would have been one opportunity to promote this brand. However, by the time the tournament began in 2021, any positive data in any of the previously listed indexes had dropped substantially because of a fundamental shift in the Belarusian regime's foreign policy and political agenda after the 2020 Presidential election.

Following the results, mass protests occurred across the country as opponents to Lukashenka refused to recognise the fraudulent results (Associated Press, 18 January 2021). The regime responded to protests through indiscriminate repression which gathered pace following support from President Putin, who saw an opportunity to visibly force Lukashenka into accepting closer integration with Russia (Onuch & Sasse, 2022: 4-5). The West and the EU re-examined their relations with Belarus in response to the electoral fraud and brutal repression by the Belarusian authorities. Finally, the EU opted to implement a series of sanctions, including freezing regime assets and barring 30 regime representatives from visiting the EU. While these would inflict some economic hardship, they were viewed more as a symbolic gesture of disapproval (Klysinski, 2021: 1). As a result, relations between Lukashenka and the West deteriorated significantly, with the Belarusian leadership resorting to a greater reliance on Russian economic, political, and security assistance (Sivitsky, 2021: 67).

The 2021 IIHFWC would now be used as a major tool in Lukashenka's attempt to survive the growing public discontent in Belarus. With direct Russian assistance, there would now be a Belarusian propaganda campaign, with Soviet-like tactics, and a fake news movement against the opposition. The Belarusian regime would politicise the tournament to promote a changing political agenda, but, as the Belarusian regime would quickly learn, sporting events do not always result in positive diplomatic effects or initiatives (Wilson, 2021: 269).

Political Agenda

The use of the tournament to promote international partnerships was initially rather clear during the joint bid between Minsk and Riga, with the Belarusian regime consistently referring to their Latvian counterparts as "friends" and "neighbours" (Echells, 2017). However, following the decision to remove the tournament from Minsk, the Belarusian regime would take a drastic turn and began to disassociate themselves from Latvia and the West, using the situation to re-position themselves as a state who are no longer dependent on, or supportive of, the West.

When Latvia eventually refused to co-host the tournament with Minsk, Lukashenka made it clear that Belarus would be ready to host the tournament alone stating that "if the IIHF succeeds

in fending off unfair pressure...but Latvia refuses to co-host, then Belarus will hold the IIHF World Championship on its own (TASS, 11 January 2021). This was an immediate sign that Lukashenka would rather act as an independent state, rather than a co-operative state with “no borders”. For the Belarusian regime, the tournament would no longer be about increased relationships with Western, EU neighbours, but instead would be used as form of sporting diplomacy to reflect increasing tension, and a change of direction, in its international relations (Lazarevich, 2021: 26).

As the Belarusian regime began to withdraw from their Western international partnerships, there was certainly no love lost from Latvia either. In particular, the Latvian Foreign Minister, Edgars Rinkevics, and the Mayor of Riga, Martins Stakis, who used the tournament to signal that the international partnership between the West and the Belarusian regime was deteriorating. They also gave a signal of support to the Belarusian opposition, indicating that the West, or at least Latvia, was clearly calling for regime change in Belarus and would no longer hold positive diplomatic relations with Lukashenka. The most notable move by Latvian politicians to dissociate themselves from the regime occurred when Latvia showed its support for the Belarusian opposition by removing the traditional red and green state flag of Belarus and replaced this with a historical Belarusian red and white Pahonia flag, which has now become the symbol of the opposition led by Tsikhanouskaya (Sridhar, 2021).

This is significant since the choice of flag flown also represents the type of partnership Latvia (and the West) would desire with Belarus. By flying the red and white Pahonia flag, Stakis and Rinkevics are expressing that for Latvia to become a partner with Belarus, they would have to build upon historical independence, and traditional Belarusian symbols, rather than the current trend of authoritarianism and nostalgia for the Soviet Union (Scollon, 2020). The situation escalated further when the IIHF denounced the move as a political message and urged Stakis to reconsider the decision to remove the state flag of Belarus (Steiss, 2021b). The Latvian authorities disagreed, and instead Sakis removed the IIHF flag rather than the red and white Pahonia flag, as shown in Figure 9. Stakis also wrote on Twitter saying, “We have to pick sides – a people striving for freedom or a dictator” (Sridhar, 25 May 2021).

Figure 9: A historical white-red-white Pahonia flag of Belarus which has replaced the IIHF flag amongst the national flags of participants in Riga



Retrieved from: Reuters, 24 May 2021.

In response, the Belarusian regime expelled all staff from Latvia's embassy in Minsk accusing Latvia of "insulting the national flag" before opening a criminal case against Rinkevics and Sakis (Tsvetkova & Marrow, 2021). In response, Latvia also expelled all Belarusian diplomats (DW News, 24 May 2021). The efforts made during the 2014 tournament to increase diplomatic ties, presence, and visits between Belarus and their Western neighbours, were being undone. Another sign that the desired slogan of "no borders" and an international partnership between Belarus and Latvia was now over.

The Belarusian regime were not just moving away from diplomatic relations with Western states however, but also with Western business. The most significant example was when the Belarusian regime began to ban the import of products produced by the sponsors who had withdrawn from the tournament. For example, the Belarusian regime introduced a temporary ban on importing certain Nivea and Skoda products after both had refused to participate in financing the tournament if it took place in Belarus (Belsat, 16 January 2021). When asked whether the decision to introduce this ban was a form of pay back or a retaliation attempt, Belarusian authorities would not rule this out (Belsat, 13 April 2021).

Such payback may have been used as an opportunity to show how the Belarusian regime still wishes to oversee a Soviet Style economy, one that Lukashenka runs manually and whose viability depends on Russian support (Jonavicius, 2022: 199). The personal decision of

Lukashenka to ban the products of Nivea and Skoda shows he is manually running the economy and the direction of international partnerships, but the rejection of Western businesses also suggest that Western relations may no longer be required in what may have been a window of opportunity for Lukashenka (Jonavicius, 2022: 204), as he looked for ways to strengthen his position without looking towards the West (Jonavicius, 2022: 206-7).

Resultingly, the tournament was used by Lukashenka to signify that the formation of international partnerships was now dependent upon ensuring regime survival, rather than economic importance as was the case during the 2014 tournament. This was further indicated by Alexei Avdonin, an analyst of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, who told the Belarusian media that the removal of the tournament from Belarus, whilst difficult to calculate, would result in negative economic consequences. Avdonin specifically stated that because of the tournament's removal, plans to increase Belarus' GDP by 21.5% by 2025 were no longer realistic (Sputnik.by, 19 January 2021a).

In the case of Skoda and Nivea, Lukashenka saw these businesses as a form of Western influence attempting to undermine his regime. Therefore, he was willing to ban the import of their products, despite the resulting negative economic consequences, under the guise of "protecting national interests" (Alexandrowskaja & Gurkov, 2021). In their new approach to international partnerships, the Belarusian regime began to side with Russia in arguing against what they both described as Western influences. Another example occurred following the IIHF decision to remove the tournament from Minsk when Russia began to question whether they should boycott the 2021 IIHFWC in Latvia due to the interference of politics in sport (Lulko, 2021).

Russian authorities also argued that the decision to remove Minsk as a host was simply due to political pressure from Western states and the IIHF pleasing Western politicians and colleagues. In *Pravda* (formerly the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), Russian authorities also stated that the motive behind the IIHF and their Western partners was to "include Belarus in the Russophobic camp of the Baltic states to put pressure on Russia" (Lulko, 2021). In response, the Belarusian regime sided with Russia in this narrative, with the Belarusian state television fully endorsing messages about "the evil West" (Yeliseyeu & Aleshko-Lessels, 2021). Consequently, a Belarusian-Russian partnership was once again visible through their joint objections.

In a sign of an economic partnership, both Russian and Belarusian media also portrayed the removal of the tournament from Minsk as result of the “Soros institutions of American globalists” (Lulko, 2021). This also being an example of joint coded-anti-semitism. Meanwhile the Belarusian news company Sputnik argued that the tournament was being politicised as part of the West’s deliberate anti-Russian activities to provoke Belarus and Russia (Sputnik.by, 19 January 2021b). Even though this was not the intention of the West, this expressive narrative was a signal that the Belarusian regime believed that Western institutions were against their interests and were using the tournament to punish them. Here, with the support of Russia, the Belarusian regime was creating an anti-Western narrative around the tournament’s decisions in a final push for the Belarusian regime to return to a preferred partnership with Russia. This was confirmed by Oleg Gaidukevich, a deputy of the House of Representatives in Belarus, who told Sputnik Belarus Radio that due to the political influence surrounding the IIHFWC2021, “we will strengthen the alliance with Russia for our economy and political system” (Sputnik.by, 19 January 2021c).

This anti-Western rhetoric was also something that Lukashenka would formulate to support nation-building centered around the Russification and neo-Sovietisation of Belarusian society. The first indication of nation-building during the IIHFWC 2021 came from Vitaly Utkin, a deputy of the Belarussian House of Representatives, following the decision to strip Minsk of the right to co-host. On state TV Utkin claimed that this was “an act of revenge on Belarusian people, descendants of the victorious men who hoisted the Soviet flag over the Reichstag” in 1945 (Tut.by, 26 January 2021). This narrative immediately showed the push of neo-Sovietisation and the othering of nation-states and indicated that the Belarusian identity stems from the Soviet Union and historical Soviet milestones.

Nation-building was also indicated when the Belarusian regime criticised others, including the IIHF and the Belarusian opposition of their anti-Russian narrative. This included their supposedly negative approach to Russian and Soviet identities, ideologies, and beliefs (Sputnik.by, 19 January 2021). Here, nation-building was also further constructed around the Russian language rather than the Belarusian language. In the initial tournament preparation, all new infrastructure signs were presented in Russian, and the slogan was written in English and Russian (and Latvian in Riga), rather than Belarusian (Belarus.by, 2014). This suggested that Lukashenka would be using the 2021 tournament as an opportunity to present a reversal of the soft-Belarusianisation policies that had been promoted in 2014.

Nation-building was also visible amongst the numerous attacks towards the West. Here, the Belarusian regime used the tactic of othering to confirm that their identity, brand, and nation-building does not feature partners in the West. For example, there was a peculiar attack towards Finland that involved numerous conspiracy theories about the Finn's grudge towards the tournament being held in Belarus. On national television, the Belarusian hockey authorities insisted that Finland's desire to remove the tournament from Belarus was simply an act of revenge due to the bitterness the Finns felt after Minsk (and Riga) beat Helsinki and Tampere to the right to host the tournament in 2017 (ONT.By, 19 January 2021).

This was one of many attacks, and conspiracy theories, expressed by the Belarusian regime and Belarusian ice hockey authorities throughout the tournament, all with the aim of othering states who they did not see positively as part of their nation-building process. Whilst conspiracy theories can be a useful way to present a nation-building process (Astapova et al, 2020: 145), they become more difficult to apply to a mega-event when a nation is no longer actively hosting the event in question. Consequently, the Belarusian regime was still attempting to find a way to present their nation-building process despite the loss of traditional influences such as tourists and locals uniting, the background of festivities and celebrations and the opportunities for urban development (Sputnik.by, 20 January 2021). For example, although disputed by the Belarusian regime, there was a suggestion that the Organising Committee for IIHFWC 2021 would interlink the controversial amendments made to the Constitution in 2020 to the tournament to justify, and legitimise, the constitutional changes under a nation-building process (Sputnik.by 13 January 2021).

Overall, the tournament was a blow to Lukashenka's nation-building image (RFE/RL Belarus Service, 18 January 2021). This was also confirmed by Dmitry Baskov, the head of the BIHF when he stated that the world's people would no longer be able to "see for themselves the incredible beauty of Belarus" (Sputnik.by, 19 January 2021d). Lukashenka had also hoped to use the tournament to promote his return to association with the Russkiy Mir that had occurred due to the changing attitudes of Belarusian citizens that was putting his regime under further threat.

In 2018, in response to the question "In which union would Belarusians live better: the EU or a Union State with Russia?", the Russian option was most popular by 64% to 20%, yet by 2020 this was just 40% to 32% (Wilson, 2021: 273). To prevent further disapproval, and reduce the risk of regime collapse, Lukashenka was looking for a way to promote his desired nation-

building and change the opinion of Belarusian citizens. Hosting the Ice Hockey World Championship would have therefore been a useful opportunity considering his brand of sport washing (Penfold, 2021). Instead, without this opportunity, further attempts at regime survival would become a major objective of the politicisation of the 2021 IIHFWC.

Whereas Lukashenka acknowledged that hosting the tournament in 2014 would increase public support and increase his chances of survival, in 2021 there was some acknowledgement that to survive the regime may have to let go off the hosting rights, even when offered a solution to ensure the tournament remained in Minsk. Such a belief was indicated following a meeting between Fasel and Lukashenka in January 2021 in which Fasel stated that “the World Championship will not be possible without a change in the political situation in the country” (Belsat, 15 January 2021). Here, Fasel was calling for the Belarusian regime to end the repression in the country and for a less authoritarian approach by Lukashenka. Refusal to change would leave the IIHF with no choice but to remove the tournament from Minsk. This provided a direct collision course between the IIHF and the Belarusian regime as under no circumstances would Lukashenka have been willing to change politically as any positive/liberal changes (in Western standards) would put his regime at risk, despite the regime hoping to use the tournament to bring their idea of normality back to the country (James, 2021)

In 2014, the Belarusian regime was willing to change politically to ensure the tournament remained in Belarus, but Lukashenka’s style of dictatorship had changed by 2021 and Lukashenka was now prepared to reverse everything to ensure his own survival (Wilson, 2021: 307). As such, Lukashenka refused to make the political changes demanded by the IIHF and lost the hosting rights for the tournament on 18th January 2021. In response, the IIHF emphasised their position in trying to use the World Championship “as a tool for reconciliation to help calm the socio-political issues happening in Belarus” (Jiwani, 2021). However, any hopes of the 2021 IIHFWC being used to calm the situation in Belarus would not be realised as the Belarusian regime would now use the removal of the tournament as an opportunity to threaten and delegitimise the opposition further.

Attacks against the opposition were primarily witnessed after the decision to remove the tournament from Minsk was heavily celebrated by the opposition with Tsikhanouskaya calling the decision “a victory” and stating that “justice had been served” (Penfold, 2021). In response, the Belarusian regime argued that it was the opposition who caused the removal of the

tournament and who were now causing damage to Belarusian society. This led to numerous attacks on Tsikhanouskaya using emotive, nationalist discourse to undermine her.

“Well of course Mrs Tsikhanouskaya then immediately sang joyfully...only a person who hates their country can rejoice that your country is deprived of a major sports tournament” – Armen Gasparyan, Russian Propagandist (CTV.by, 21 January 2021).

“Today you [Tsikhanouskaya] are celebrating a victory, stripping the Belarusian people of a real celebration. After that you cannot call yourselves Belarusians! You are traitors! – Dmitry Baskov, Head of BIHF (Tetrault-Farber, 2021).

“Tsikhanouskaya and company tore back the curtain through their actions and showed what they really want for the Belarusian people” – Vitaly Utkin, Parliamentarian (Yeliseyeu & Aleshko-Lessels, 2021).

“The primary victim of Tsikhanouskaya’s sinister provocation was Belarusian business, but even more so the fans and Belarusian children...Tsikhanouskaya took away the children’s dream” – STV State Media “on behalf of the children” (CTV.by, 21 January 2021).

“Through these actions, people themselves are the first to suffer” – STV State Media (TVR.by, 21 January 2021).

Instead of enlightening Belarusian citizens with the real reasons for the removal of the tournament from Minsk, the regime began to criticise Tsikhanouskaya through a power play of propaganda (Yeliseyeu & Aleshko-Lessels, 2021). But, by politicising the tournament herself, Tsikhanouskaya had unfortunately walked into a trap whereby the regime would also further their politicisation of the tournament using Tsikhanouskaya’s interventions as a tool to portray the opposition as a public threat who “hates their country” and who cause people to “suffer”. The Belarusian regime hoped that this would allow them to either regain support or delegitimise the opposition and reduce their credibility.

For many, this was an example of Lukashenka using the tournament to promote his biopoliticisation strategy where his regime would now be protecting society from a threat, in line with the usual actions of Lukashenka where he “creates a problem which only the dictator can solve” (Wilson, 2021: 256). The problem was that Minsk had been removed as the hosts, a problem created by Lukashenka, but was a problem which only he could now solve by arguing

that he will now protect the Belarusian people against the supposedly threatening opposition whose legitimacy he was seeking to reduce.

Politicisation of Sport

The Belarusian regime's success in line with the theory behind the politicisation of sport was much more limited during the 2021 tournament. Firstly, when it comes to power for change, after falling for the "catch-22 scenario" in 2014, the Belarusian authorities refused to do so in 2021. This is despite Lukashenka once saying that "I am convinced that even today such sport competitions are capable of changing the political situation for the better" (Brown, 2019). The Belarusian regime had the opportunity to change politically and doing so would have allowed them to retain the hosting rights. But, under the threat of the opposition and regime collapse, the Belarusian regime rejected this opportunity and instead used the tournament to amend their style of authoritarianism to become more hard-line, with increased suppression and threats towards opponents. This was clearly visible in their sporting diplomacy throughout the tournament, which was used as a platform for othering and to highlight political and ideological rivalries, create tension and conflict, and to send symbolic messages of disapproval towards Western nations.

For the Belarusian regime, sporting diplomacy was also used to gain greater international recognition and support from the East, and to establish itself in the more Eastern, pro-Russian, political order. This was also shown through its soft power strategies and the banning of Nivea and Skoda products in a move with propagandist potential. Whilst the reaction towards the tournament sponsors did not convey an image of modernity or create a positive perception of the state, as Cha (2009: 1590) says soft power in sport should do, the decision by the Belarusian regime certainly helped position themselves on the global stage.

There was also an interesting shift in attitudes to the politicisation of sport by both Belarus and the West. For example, in 2014 Lukashenka actively promoted the politicisation of sport and the IIHFWCs with comments such as "Belarusian sport helps promote national interests in foreign policy" (Belarus in Focus, 11 April 2015). Yet, in 2021 the narrative from his regime included stating how the decision to move the 2021 IIHFWC from Minsk was "biased and politicised" (BeITA, 18 January 2021), and that "there are politics, the pressure of which the sports authorities unfortunately could not withstand. The pressure turned out to be stronger than the inviolability of the principle of sports without politics" (Yelisseyeu & Aleshko-Lessels, 2021). The Belarusian organising committee also stated that removing Belarus as a co-host "set

a precedent for using sport competitions as an instrument to please the interests of political demagogues” (Baltic Times, 19 January 2021). This is despite the Belarusian regime setting this exact precedent with their politicisation of the 2014 tournament.

Meanwhile, the West had also changed their attitude towards the use of politics during the IIHFWC’s. For example, prior to the 2014 IIHFWC, the Latvian authorities stated that they had no desire for mixing politics with sports (Nielsen, 2012). Yet in 2021, the Latvian authorities would provide one of the major political controversies of the tournament through the flag case and even admitted to the use of political messages in their narratives (Sridhar, 2021). Rene Fasel, although under criticism for his close association to Lukashenka and the Belarusian regime, even stated that Riga, “the opposition”, would use the IIHFWC “for its own political purposes” (ONT.by, 19 January 2021). To an extent, this showed that the politicisation of sport only appears to be supported by governments or international organisations when they sense success from their actions.

Aftermath

The immediate data that is available despite the impacts of Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, suggests that the tournament did not benefit Lukashenka. For example, Figures 1 and 2 show that political stability and government effectiveness have recently been in decline. Whilst these will have been heavily impacted by political protests and the pandemic, this still suggests that the politicisation of the tournament could not avert the decline, or act as a distraction from the political difficulties the regime face. This is despite initial rises in stability and effectiveness in the years immediately after bid acquisition. As shown in Figure 6, the removal of the tournament also removed any chance of a significant economic uplift. Thus, confirming the analysis by Alexei Avdonin that stated a 25.1% increase in GDP as a result of hosting the tournament would not be possible.

As for the regime’s political agenda, in the aftermath of the tournament the regime continued to disassociate themselves with Western partners. For example, after initially banning the import of Skoda and Nivea goods in May 2021, the Belarusian regime extended this ban in November 2021, under government decree No.622, for a further six months (Belsat, 3 November 2021). The extension of the ban suggests that the retaliation is now part of a long-term plan to dissociate itself from Western businesses.

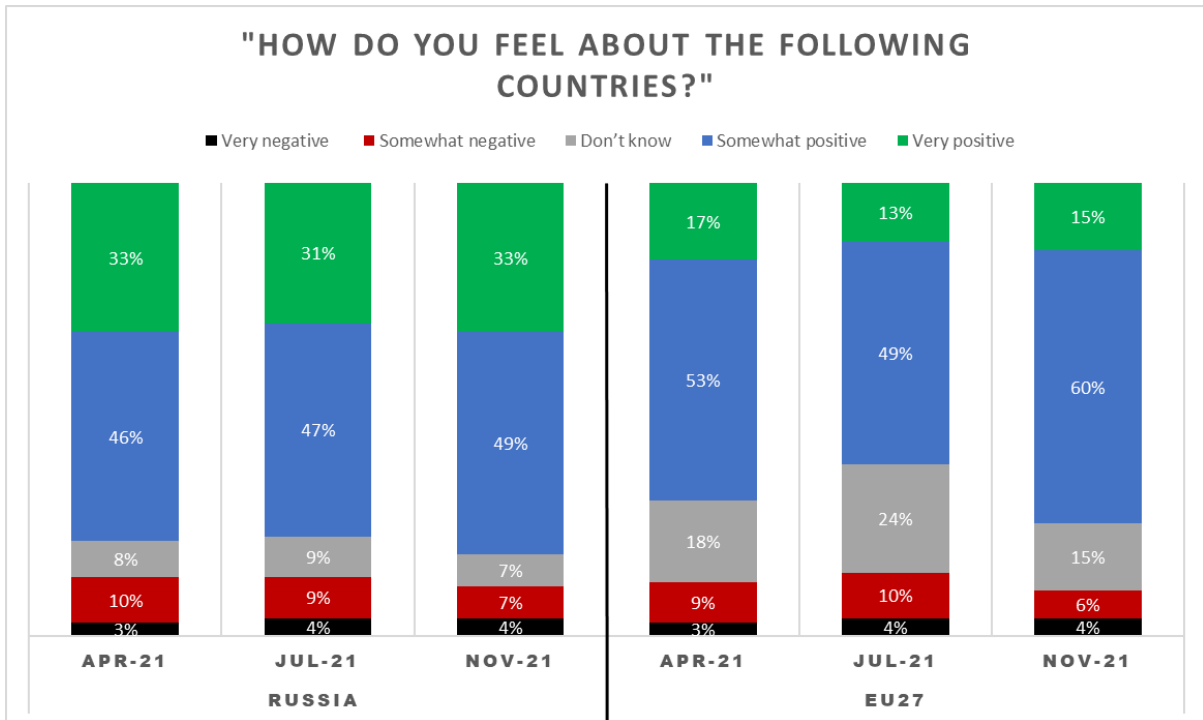
The Belarusian regime has also indicated continued commitment towards Russian partners through ice hockey. This can be witnessed through Dinamo Minsk’s, a club who has strong

ties with the Belarusian regime, continued participation in the Russian KHL (Kononczuk, 2021). The KHL had consisted of three Western, European participants for the 2021/22 season in Jokerit Helsinki, Dinamo Riga and Dinamo Minsk, but following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, both Jokerit and Dinamo Riga condemned the Russian regime and withdrew from the KHL (Yle News, 25 February 2021). Meanwhile, Dinamo Minsk chose to remain, indicating their, and the regime's, willingness to continue with their Russian partners even if other European members are not.

As for nation-building in Belarus, Lukashenka has continued his promotion of the *Ruskiy Mir*. With this also culminating in Belarusian support of the invasion of Ukraine in which supposedly, according to Lukashenka and Putin, the Russian World is being defended (Timsit & Bennett, 2022). Regardless of domestic pressure, Lukashenka still insists the implementation of the Russian vector in Belarus' domestic and foreign policy despite the deteriorating political stability and effectiveness (Sviridenko & Orzechowski, 2021: 67). Following the use of the 2021 IIHFWC to reverse the soft-Belarusianisation policies of 2014-2020, Lukashenka has also continued to spread the use of the Russian language and Russian internet and media sources (Dorosh & Voiat, 2022: 40). This part of the aftermath seems to confirm that the tournament was used as an opportunity to re-introduce a strong Russian foundation to Belarusian society. Whilst Lukashenka has continued upon this path, his hopes of using the tournament to encourage Belarusian citizens to support the regime's desire nation-building approach has not paid off, and instead of gaining support, the opposite has occurred (Drakokhrust, 2021).

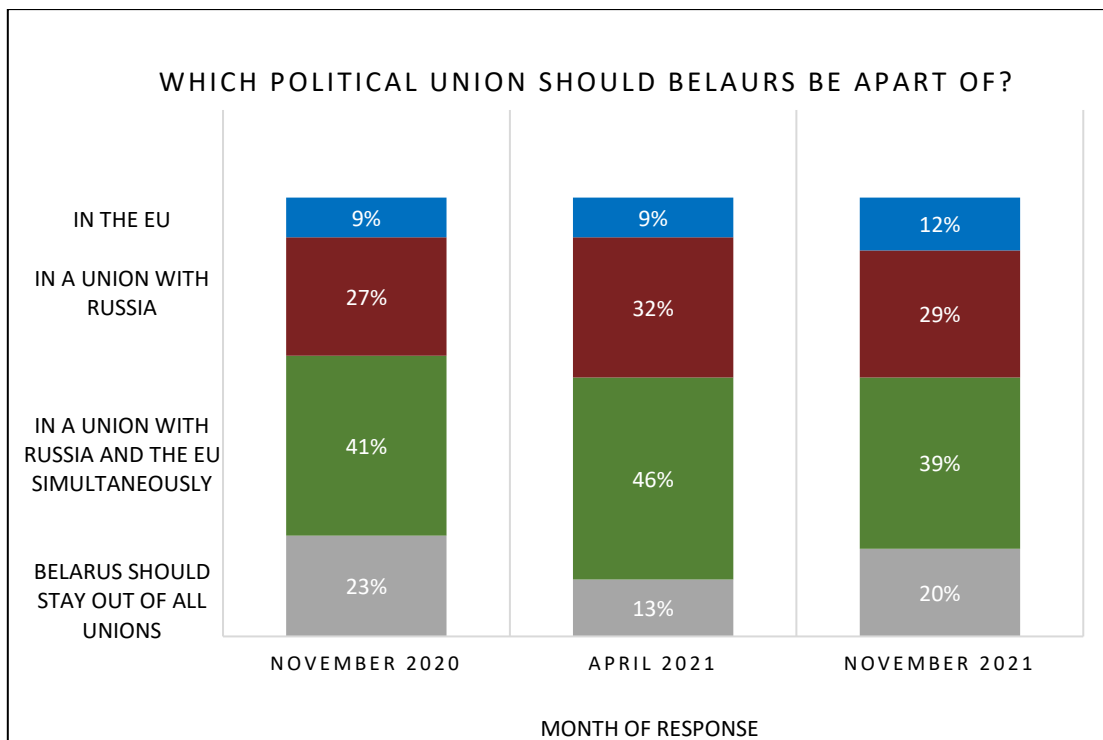
Following the tournament there has appeared to be little change in public opinion on attitudes towards other countries and possible political unions for Belarus. For example, data from Chatham House, as shown in Figures 10 and 11, indicates that positive attitudes towards Russia remained stable between April 2021 (pre-tournament) and November 2021 (post-tournament). Meanwhile, positive attitudes towards EU countries grew slightly during the same period, and whilst support for a union with Russia has remained stable pre- and post-tournament, support for joining the EU slightly grew amongst Belarusian citizens. Figures 10 and 11 show a continued polarisation of Belarusian society but may also indicate that in the immediate aftermath the politicisation of the 2021 IIHFWC has had no significant impact on nation-building amongst the whole Belarusian society. Whilst the tournament did not increase the pro-Russian sentiment that the regime had hoped for, the tournament neither resulted in a mass growth of pro-Western support.

Figure 10: Belarusian Public Opinion Towards Russia and the EU27



Source: Astapenia (2022)/Chatham House, Own creation.

Figure 11: Belarusian Public Opinion Towards Political Union Membership (% of people in favour)

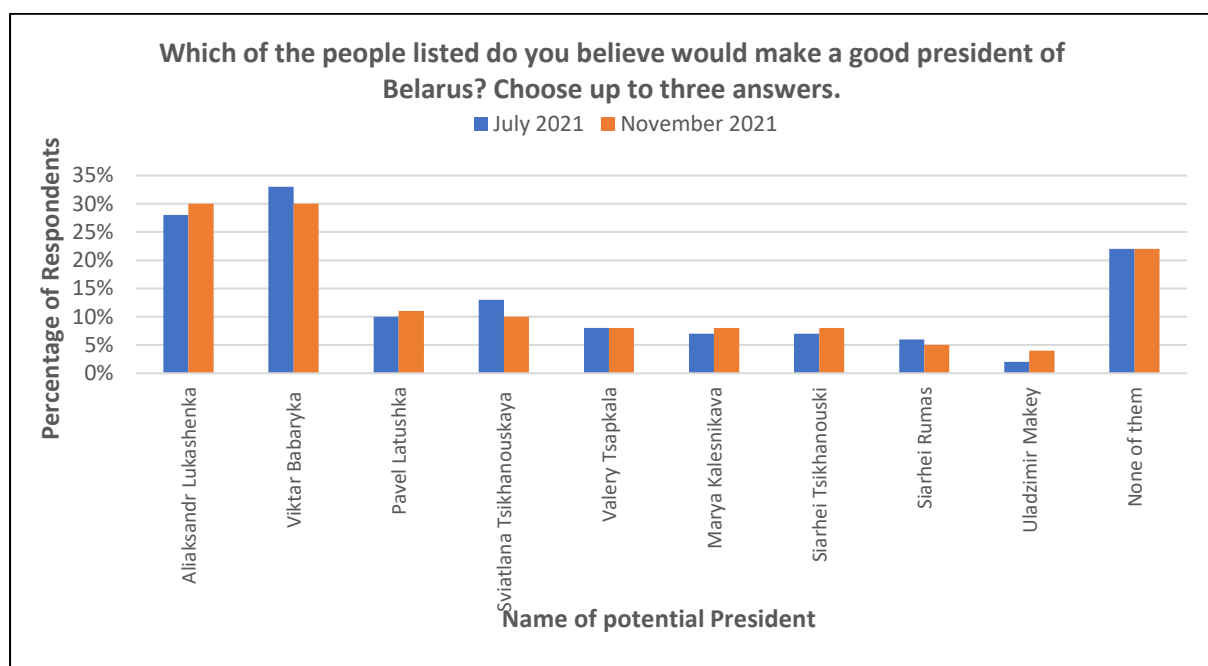


Source: Astapenia (2022)/Chatham House, own creation.

Yet, whilst Belarusian society remains heavily polarised, the citizens who reject Lukashenka’s desired nation-building, and who are pro-democracy, pro-EU and anti-Russia, are much more mobilised than the Belarusian regime and consequently pose a direct threat to Lukashenka (Rosenfeld, 2022: 154). Worryingly for Lukashenka though, attempts to gain support through nation-building have failed since many of those who disapprove Lukashenka are also pro-Russian (Rosenfeld, 2022: 153). However, it can be suggested that in the immediate aftermath, the politicisation of the 2021 IIFWC has helped to ensure immediate regime survival as there have been no visible signs of an incoming, successful, revolution.

Data from Chatham House, shown in Figure 12, suggests that the attacks on Tsikhanouskaya in association with the tournament may have been effective in the long term. After support of up to 20% of Belarusian citizens following the 2020 election (based on the election results released by the Belarusian Electoral Commission), by July 2021 only 13% of citizens believed she is one of the top three candidates who would make a good president, with this figure falling to just 10% in the further aftermath by November 2021. Meanwhile, the percentage of people who believed Lukashenka would make a good president increased during the same timeframe. While there could be a number of factors contributing to Tsikhanouskaya's decline in popularity, the regime believes that portraying her as a threat and a traitor throughout the tournament would have contributed.

Figure 12: Who Belarusian Citizens Believe Would Make a Good President



Source: Astapenia (2022)/Chatham House, own creation.

However, whilst Lukashenka may have used the tournament to help delegitimise Tsikhanouskaya, and remove the threat she has posed, the regime is still at risk as fear of others does not always result in public approval for the regime (Rosenfeld, 2022: 152). This is shown in Lukashenka's approval rating where prior to the tournament Lukashenka supposedly held a 66.5% approval rating (BeITA, 10 February 2021). Yet the data from Chatham House in Figure 12, stating that 30% of people in November 2021 believe Lukashenka would make a good president, suggests that approval ratings have fallen post-tournament. Unlike 2014, the politicisation of the tournament in 2021 has not given Lukashenka an approval rating boost in the aftermath, so whilst the politicisation of the tournament may have supported in delegitimising the opposition, it did not remove the risk of regime collapse.

The aftermath of the tournament also saw a change in the political relationship between the IIHF and the Belarusian regime and the ability to continue the politicisation of ice hockey mega-events. Following the 2021 tournament, Fasel, the IIHF President, who was a strong ally of Lukashenka and who has also had strong links with the Putin regime in Russia (Morgan, 2016), stepped down after 27 years in charge. Consequently, the Belarusian regime had lost their soft power influence within the IIHF, and a figure who would ensure the Belarusian regime could use IIHF tournaments for political purposes (Charter 97, 11 January 2021). As a result, the IIHF and its affiliated members began to turn against the Belarusian regime's politicisation of ice hockey, and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Belarusian national team and the BIHA were expelled from the IIHF, preventing Belarus from participating in or hosting any IIHF event until further notice (IIHF, 28 February 2022). Lukashenka's moving of the goalposts to return to an era of pro-Russian geopolitics has ultimately eliminated the Belarusian regime from the period of play where they could use the IIHFWCs to promote their political agenda.

7. Analysis

	2014	2021
1. Who is Belarus' current and potential allies?	The West, in particular the EU.	Russia and members of the Russkiy Mir.
2. Who is Belarus' current and potential enemies?	Russia.	The West, in particular the EU.
3. How can Belarus maintain and nurture potential allies?	Formation of new international partnerships, reducing levels of illiberalism and sports washing.	Aligning nation-building with allies using mega-events to increase public support and awareness.
4. How can Belarus counter their current enemies and emerging threats?	Increased recognition of a Belarusian identity to provide legitimacy to the country and regime.	Withdrawal from economic partnerships, the othering of perceived enemies, and suppression of opponents.
5. How do Belarus justify the four calculations to their public and the global community?	Economic development, public opinion, and egalitarian nationalism.	Bio-politicisation of society, whereby the regime is the only possible protector of Belarusian society against a perceived threat.

Table 3: Comparative Summary of Belarusian Geopolitical Codes in 2014 and 2021

The key aim of this thesis was to display the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations in action using sport, and the presented case studies, and the subsequent geopolitical code assessments, answer the core research question: how does the Belarusian regime, led by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, use sport for political ends? Through the assessments and cases, we can see how sport plays a role in promoting the political agenda of the regime, and how sport is used to promote allies, protect against enemies, and as a platform to allow the regime to justify their political agenda to the Belarusian public.

The case studies and the geopolitical codes have emphasised how the Belarusian regime is built upon a desire for international partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival; and have also highlighted how the regime will use sport differently depending upon the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. This has helped achieve the aim of showing how the political agenda of the regime will be approached differently based on the stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Table 3 provides an initial brief comparison of the geopolitical codes in 2014 and 2021 and shows the shifting geopolitical relationship between Belarus and Russia, whilst also acknowledging where the regime's political agenda features within the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Full geopolitical code self-assessments for Belarus in 2014 and 2021, based upon the case studies, can be found in Tables 4 and 5 respectively.

Table 4: Belarusian Geopolitical Codes 2014 Based upon Case Study 1 (2014 Ice Hockey World Championship)

Geopolitical Codes	Belarus 2014
Who is Belarus' current and potential allies?	EU28, United States, Canada, Australia. Potential allies are found throughout Europe and the West, with all allies holding existing liberal-democratic governance. Amongst the EU28, the most important allies are those who are also part of the post-Soviet region, strongly including Lithuania and Latvia.
Who is Belarus' current and potential enemies?	Russia and members of the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) concept.
How can Belarus maintain and nurture potential allies?	<p>Economic partnerships, transition towards a neo-liberal economy, increased diplomatic visits, tourism, and language capabilities, removal of illiberal regime policies, joint international projects, mega-events.</p> <p>Following the 2014 IIHF WC, Belarus has developed potential allies by providing the framework for the Belarus-EU Visa Regime, a sign of a move away from their existing illiberal visa policies, through the development of infrastructure to allow increased tourism and diplomatic meetings. Consequently, the Belarusian regime has also aligned its nation-building approach with its new allies to create a stronger shared community and relationship. This has also included increasing language capabilities in languages spoken by their new allies (i.e., English) that will allow them to maintain and increase, diplomatic discussions.</p>
How can Belarus counter their current enemies and emerging threats?	<p>Reducing dependency through new international partnerships, trading relations, and nation-building.</p> <p>Through the techniques used to maintain and nurture potential allies, the Belarusian regime is also countering their enemies (Russia) by removing the dependency they hold upon them economically and societally. The regime also establishes a much stronger Belarusian identity through nation-building to disassociate itself with the Russkiy Mir. This is further shown through the move towards an identity built upon Rzeczpospolita that will also appeal to their new allies and build a coalition of support. This will increase the legitimacy, credibility, and recognition of the Belarusian state, reducing the threat of Russian influence.</p>
How does Belarus justify the four calculations to the public and the global community?	<p>Economic circumstances, public opinion, and egalitarian nationalism.</p> <p>Here, the regime justifies its geopolitical approaches by arguing that they are the course of action(s) that will provide the most economic benefit. For example, a move towards potential allies such as the EU would provide economic support and diplomatic improvements which can, and did, lead to the removal of sanctions for Belarus. Economic justifications are also made under the argument that by remaining economically dependent upon current and potential enemies, economic circumstances will deteriorate. Secondly, as public opinion shifted towards a new set of geopolitical codes, the Belarusian regime responded and portrayed itself as a regime who are representing the people. Similarly, justifications were built upon egalitarian nationalism where the decisions, rhetoric, and activities during the 2014 IIHF WC could be understood through values and the argument of uniqueness, unity, and sovereignty of Belarusians. As was on display when countering enemies through nation-building.</p>

Table 5: Belarusian Geopolitical Codes 2021 Based Upon Case Study 2 (2021 Ice Hockey World Championship)

Geopolitical Codes	Belarus 2021
Who is Belarus' current and potential allies?	Russia and members of the Eastern vector of international relations.
Who is Belarus' current and potential enemies?	EU27, particularly Latvia. Potential enemies are now states who are part of the liberal-democratic West, for example, the United States, and states who have imposed heavy sanctions on Belarus. For example, the United Kingdom.
How can Belarus maintain and nurture potential allies?	<p>Reversal of nation-building processes, allied guarantees, sports washing, visual discourse, joint symbolic narrative.</p> <p>A reversal of soft-Belarusianisation policies allowed the regime's nation-building process to realign with the Russkiy Mir concept. This was nurtured through ally guarantees and joint support (i.e., a joint symbolic narrative against the IIHF and the West from Russia) and shown to the public through sports washing during the 2021 IIHFWC. The tournament was used to present visual discourse representing their new allies and was constructed using Russian signs and symbols representing a Soviet heritage.</p>
How can Belarus counter their current enemies and emerging threats?	<p>Repression, totalitarianism, economic provocations and retaliation, conspiracy theories, renewal of old alliances.</p> <p>Attempts to dissociate from enemies and threats are made clear to the entire society and can include provocations whereby imports from the enemy are banned (i.e., the Skoda and Nivea case), but will also include attempts to renew old alliances to increase support for Belarus against their supposed threats. The exclusion of existing diplomats of the enemy, as occurred with Latvian diplomats during the 2021 IIHFWC, can also occur. Conspiracy theories are also used to present a threat and delegitimise any enemies to prevent them from gaining any support from Belarusian citizens and wider society. Any public support for the enemy that does arise is faced with repression and the regime deploys totalitarian measures (i.e., human rights abuses, cleansing and imprisonment, nationalist rhetoric) to prevent support for the enemy from arising.</p>
How does Belarus justify the four calculations to the public and the global community?	<p>Bio-politicisation of society and fait accompli.</p> <p>To justify these calculations, and the change in the codes from 2014, the Belarusian regime has adopted a bio-political approach where all aspects of society, including sport, as shown, are a matter of life and death for the population. Here, the Belarusian regime has been arguing that there is a threat from Western influence, specifically Western business, tournament sponsors, and the domestic opposition. Consequently, the regime has gained total control over citizens to protect them and believes that to achieve this they require new, Eastern allies. The regime's justification is that only the regime can protect society against this Western threat and to do so they need full control that allows them to carry out the methods and techniques shown in these calculations. To an extent, there has also been a fait accompli where, following the disputed election and in line with the cyclicity of relations, and these calculations had already been decided and thus now the public had no option but to accept the changes.</p>

For the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, Tables 3 and 4 provide an additional indication to what was already well documented that in 2014 Belarus had entered a pro-Western stage of the cycle. However, as stated by Kazaharski (2021: 71) there will always be a return to Russian support and the continuation of the cycle, and this was indicated in Tables 3 and 5 where the assessments showed a pro-Russian stage of the cycle. Many Western commentators had been questioning whether Belarus' pro-Western relations that had been visible since 2014 would remain permanent, in effect ending the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, with Euro-Atlantic/Belarus relations on an upward trajectory and Belarus-Russian relations on a one-way downward spiral (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2022: 4). Yet, these were to be false assumptions as the answer was visible during the events regarding the 2021 IIHFWC in which political messages that had not been seen in the usual public sphere, such as parliament, were provided. Confirming the continuation, and existence, of the cycle.

The claim that the sporting arena is sometimes the only arena in which political messages can be expressed is also supported by the geopolitical code assessment based upon the case studies of the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC. This is supported on two fronts. Firstly, on a practical matter, traditional geopolitical codes are calculated based upon economic or military operations (Musiol, 420: 2019), rather than sport. But the outcomes here show that mega-events, and the politicisation of sport, can also be used to assess the geopolitical direction of a country. So, when an authoritarian regime withholds economic and military data and including political messages, or, similarly when this data is no longer publicly accessible for circumstances beyond the researcher's control (i.e., the impact of sanctions imposed due to the invasion of Ukraine), the sporting arena may be the only possible way to see geopolitical phenomena.

Second, Lukashenka's political messages have frequently avoided committing to either the East or the West, and he has also stated that he will not pick between the two. However, as evidenced by the case studies and geopolitical codes, while Lukashenka refuses to proclaim his decision in a political arena, this choice has been plainly demonstrated in a sporting arena. In this case, we might conclude that the Belarusian regime exploited sport to indicate their preferred geopolitical direction. This suggests that the sporting arena may be the only arena in which Belarus' geopolitical choices may be conveyed during any stage of the cyclicity of relations.

For the Belarusian geopolitical phenomena, this cyclical shift, the relevant characteristics, and how they can be witnessed during a sporting mega-event, can be further understood through

the analysis of H1, that stated: As of 2021, the Belarusian regime has entered a new pro-Russian stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

Wilson (2021) and Snapkouski (2021) argued that 2014 saw the revival of a pro-Western stage of the cyclicity of relations. My geopolitical code assessments based upon evidence of the 2014 IIHFWC suggests that this was correct. As shown in Table 4, we see that at this point Belarus began to consider Western states, particularly the EU, as their major allies. Meanwhile, Russia was now being seen as an enemy and a threat to the Belarusian state and regime. Under a pro-Western stage of the cycle, Abadjian (2020: 86) had suggested that the Belarusian regime would find allies within the West to ensure safety, economic, and political stability. The outcomes of the calculations in Table 4 also confirms this as allies were maintained, and threats were countered, through increased economic support and performance. The move Westward also aligned with public opinion, which would increase political stability for the regime.

But, as shown in Table 5, this pro-Western stage did not continue, and as of 2021, the Belarusian regime has entered a new pro-Russian stage of relations. In Table 5, we see that the calculations indicate the Belarusian regime's allies are now members of the Eastern vector, including Russia, whilst their former Western allies are now considered enemies. Particularly those who have placed sanctions upon the regime as discussed in Case Study 2. During a pro-Russian stage of the cycle, Abadjian (2020: 86) had suggested that the Belarusian regime would see increased integration with, and support from and towards, Russia, potentially through a neo-Soviet nation-building process. Table 5 suggests this through countering enemies with allied support from Russia and maintaining the renewal of their alliance with a *Russkiy Mir* (neo-Soviet) nation-building process. Thus, further confirming the new stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

Jonavicius (2013: 82) stated that a shift in the cycle would also occur to ensure Lukashenka's authoritarian grip on power would remain unchallenged by domestic opposition. As shown in Table 5, the pro-Russian calculations were justified through a bio-politicisation of society where the domestic opposition was deemed as part of the threat. As shown in Case Study 2, the attacks, with the support of Russia, on the opposition decreased their legitimacy. Thus, ensuring Lukashenka remains unchallenged whilst bringing a pro-Western stage to an end. Therefore, based on this comparative analysis, I would conclude that H1 cannot be rejected.

The shift in the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, and the politicisation of sport, have also shown that the Belarusian regime's political agenda is undeniably built upon international

partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival. Consequently, the case studies and codes have also clearly demonstrated, and extended upon, the answer to the core research question: how does the Belarusian regime, led by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, use sport for political ends?

As shown in the case studies, sport has been shown to provide a basis for international partnerships through traditional sporting diplomacy. This consists of providing a stage to increase diplomatic communications, a stage for othering of states, and an opportunity to increase economic relations through developing new trading partners. Secondly, sport has been used by the regime for nation-building by creating a platform for increased visibility of a unique Belarusian identity, and promotion of symbolic national symbols. Without sport, this aspect of the political agenda would have been difficult to promote to an audience outside of Belarus. Finally, sport was used to achieve regime survival with the mega-events providing opportunities to improve the local economy and infrastructure that would create a positive outlook for the regime and increase political stability, effectiveness, and support. Sport also provided a platform for the regime to challenge any opposition and present the regime as a protector against a threat that could be detrimental to the survival of the regime.

The political agenda promoted in sport has also been used to signify the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Snapkouski (2021: 40) stated that a change in the cycle of relations would result in a significant change in the political agenda of the regime. My comparative case studies have shown this to be correct with a vastly different approach to international partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival during the pro-Western stage for the 2014 IIHFWC compared to the pro-Russian stage for the 2021 IIHFWC.

As a result, the remaining research questions, regarding how sport is used in respect to each aspect of the Belarusian regime's political agenda, and to signify the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, can be answered through an analysis of the remaining hypotheses, beginning with H2: The Belarusian regime's approach *to international partnerships* is dependent upon the stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Eastern partnerships will be dominant during a pro-Russian stage of the cycle and Western partnerships will be dominant during a pro-Western stage of the cycle.

As demonstrated in Case Study 2 with the cases of Skoda, Nivea, and Latvian authorities, the Belarusian regime indicated that partnerships with the West would end in 2021, which was confirmed in the geopolitical code calculations in Table 5, which also signalled their desire to return to Eastern vector partnership, and the establishment of Eastern alliances, which would

dominate the direction of Belarusian policy during a pro-Russian stage. Lind (2021: 12) and Kazharski & Makarychev (2013: 3) had stated partnerships with Russia would be formed when the regime is required to challenge a domestic opposition using suppression and this occurred in 2021, as shown in Case Study 2 through the joint attacks on Tsikhanouskaya from Belarusian and Russian media. Sannikov (2005: 85) had also stated that during a pro-Russian stage there would be an appeal to Eastern partnerships due to sanctions imposed on the Belarusian regime. This had also occurred in Case Study 2 during the discussion on the regime's economic response. Overall, these actions signify that Belarus had returned to a pro-Russian stage of the cycle in 2021 with an appeal to Eastern vector partnerships, including Russia.

However, in 2014, and during the respective IIHFWC, the regime attracted Western vector partnerships in the pro-Western stage of the cycle. This is shown in Table 4 where Western states are Belarus' allies. Kryvoi (2015: 6) had suggested that during a pro-Western stage, Belarus would look to create new diplomatic partnerships with the EU, to replace the economic dependency it has on Russia. This was visible during the 2014 IIHFWC when new diplomatic ties and facilities ensured the removal of economic sanctions on Belarus and ensured the initial framework and environment for the Belarus-EU visa regime. Table 4 also supports this by showing that the justification for the pro-Western relations was due to the economic circumstances. Thus, signifying that in a pro-Western stage the Belarusian regime will appeal to Western partnerships, which would dominate the direction of Belarusian policy. Therefore, based on this comparative analysis, I would conclude that H2 cannot be rejected.

Next, H3: The Belarusian regime's approach to the nation-building process is dependent upon the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. A *Russkiy Mir* identity will be expressed during a pro-Russian stage of the cycle and a *Rzeczpospolita* identity will be expressed during a pro-Western stage of the cycle. The case studies and geopolitical codes also show how the nation-building process varied on the geopolitical stage. During the pro-Russian stage at the 2021 IIHFWC, a *Russkiy Mir* identity was expressed, whilst during the pro-Western stage at the 2014 IIHFWC saw a *Rzeczpospolita* identity expressed. Both of which are supported by the outcomes in Tables 4 & 5.

For the *Russkiy Mir* identity to be expressed, according to Shumskaya (2021: 115), we would expect to see a promotion of the Russian language and international relations focussing on Eurasia with a rejection of Western-leaning nationalism. Manaev et al (2011: 101) acknowledged this would also include references to a Soviet heritage (neo-Sovietism) and

would contribute to the weakening of a European identity. During the 2021 tournament, and the pro-Russian stage, all these actions were visible. The primary language in Belarus of the initial tournament infrastructure returned to being in Russian, with all official regime statements also conducted in Russian. Meanwhile, Soviet heritage was represented during the flag controversy case. But most of all, as shown in Table 5, there was clear evidence of the weakening of European identity with the suppression of the pro-Western opposition and false accusations, through conspiracy theories designed to weaken European states, who were now seen as an enemy and a threat towards Belarus. Thus, confirming that during a pro-Russian stage, the Russkiy Mir identity is expressed.

However, the codes in Tables 4 and 5 confirm the suggestion by Boulegue (2020: 2) that the regime will also move away from the Russkiy Mir if it becomes detrimental to their interests. In 2014, when this was the case, the pro-Western stage of the cycle saw an attempt to promote a Rzeczpospolita identity built on the uniqueness of Belarusian and historical relations to Europe. As shown with the historical mascot at the 2014 IIHFWC built upon Rzeczpospolita mythology and Slavic identity, and the first major use of the Belarusian language in 20 years. Lind (2021: 14) had also stated that a Rzeczpospolita identity would involve a significant attempt to open Belarus to foreign tourists. This was witnessed with the removal of visas for the 2014 tournament, and the further relaxation of visa policies in the years following. Thus, the examples and the codes based upon the case studies, show that during a pro-Western stage of the cycle, a Rzeczpospolita identity will be expressed. Therefore, based on this comparative analysis, I would conclude that H3 cannot be rejected.

Finally, H4: The Belarusian regime's approach to ensuring regime survival is dependent upon the cyclical nature of Belarus-Russian relations. Survival is ensured through the support of the Russian regime and the suppression of opposition during a pro-Russian stage of the cycle with survival ensured through the support of the EU economically and through increased public support during a pro-Western stage of the cycle.

When faced with domestic pressure from domestic opposition, Wilson (2021: 12) stated that Lukashenka will always return to Russia for support, despite previous attempts to move West. This was the case in the pro-Russian stage of 2021 when the Belarusian regime used an alliance with Russia to help suppress the growing opposition through totalitarian measures, with the assessment of Russia as an ally in Table 5 supporting this. These measures were seen through the nationalist rhetoric aimed at delegitimising Tsikhanouskaya following the removal of the

2021 IIHFWC from Minsk, alongside the ongoing oppression of citizens and abuse of human rights following the previous presidential election. These are further emphasised in the geopolitical justifications for 2021 in Table 5. The 2021 geopolitical codes confirm the acknowledgement by Jarabik (2009:2) that regime support from the EU is only ever temporary and that a return to a pro-Russian stage will see a return of Russian support to help ensure regime survival.

However, regime survival in 2014, during a pro-Western stage, was achieved by increasing public support and EU economic support, both of which are shown in Table 4 as part of the pro-Western geopolitical codes. For example, in line with the theory of Rodriguez-Diaz et al (2021: 6), the developed infrastructure for the 2014 IIHFWC contributed to an improvement in Lukashenka's approval ratings and chances of regime survival. The regime also took use of the 2014 event to strengthen ties with the EU leading to the withdrawal of EU economic sanctions on Belarus that was aided by a stronger diplomatic relationship and the development of some liberal measures (i.e., visa-free travel). Whereas during the pro-Russian stage when the regime moves away from Western economic support, here the regime showed that relations with the EU would be important for the survival of the Belarusian economy, and consequently, the regime. This supports Marples' (2013) statement that regime survival will not always be provided by the East. Particularly during a pro-Western stage of the cycle. Therefore, based on this comparative analysis, I would conclude that H4 cannot be rejected.

8. Discussion

8.1 The Future of the Cyclicity of Belarus-Russian Relations

The actions around regarding the 2021 IIHFWC clearly show that the Belarusian regime has ended their most recent pro-Western stage of the cycle, which had been visible since 2014. This has meant a fourth stage has been added to the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, as shown in Table 6 below.

Stage	Geopolitical Orientation	Timeframe
1	Pro-Western	1994-2000
2	Pro-Russian	2000-2014
3	Pro-Western	2014-2021
4	Pro-Russian	2021-Present

Table 6: Overview of the Cyclicity of Belarus-Russian Relations

Despite the existence of a new, pro-Russian stage in 2021, it may be impossible to determine the exact moment of the start of the fourth stage through the politicisation of sport due to the limited sporting calendar in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There have been questions about whether the fourth stage had already begun in 2020 following the Presidential election, with Leukavets (2021: 92) considering how prior to the election Lukashenka used strong anti-Russian rhetoric, but afterwards shifted to a more friendly discourse with the Russian regime, which highlighted the Belarusian regimes' returning dependency on Russia.

These possibilities provide two questions, and opportunities, for further research. Firstly, to determine the point at which stage 3 ended, and stage 4 began. Was it prior to the 2020 election? In the immediate aftermath of the election? Or in January 2021 when a pro-Russian narrative began following the removal of Minsk as a 2021IIHFWC host? Secondly, with sport unable to determine the exact point, there is an opportunity to explore if there are any other spheres, outside of sport and the normal political spheres, which can be used to present political messages and signify the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

However, based on current research and understanding, this new pro-Russian stage certainly did not begin before 2020, with Belarus-Russian relations having deteriorated into crisis by the end of 2019 (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2020: 48). Coincidentally, Belarus' integration attempts

with the EU through new international partnerships, and a continuance of its soft-Belarusianisation programme, were extremely noticeable throughout 2019 with strong pro-Western acts and a pro-Western political agenda. For example, in 2019, Belarus and the EU finalised the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement, whilst at the same time the regime continued to find initiatives to promote the Belarusian language and culture (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2020: 49).

But, as we now know, Belarus-Russian relations would regain stability over the course of the following 18 months, whilst Belarus-EU relations would enter crisis. Although, given Lukashenka's structural dependence on Russia, increasing joint security and military cooperation, and the Belarusian and Russian regimes' underlying mutual mistrust of the West, which has always undermined any diplomatic progress with the West, an abrupt shift in the cycle should not have come as a surprise (Jarabik, 2009: 2; Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2020: 58-59). So, whether the fourth stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations began in 2020 or 2021, the shift in the cycle appears to show that pro-Western stages of the cycle will be short and temporary, with both existing pro-Western stages lasting for around 6 years before ending abruptly, whilst pro-Russian stages will be considerably longer.

So, what does the future hold for the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations? Based on the characteristics of the existing stages of the cycle, this new pro-Russian stage could last for over a decade. However, this will be dependent on the levels of integration Belarus has with Russia under the Union State Agreement, the war in Ukraine including the reactions and responses from the West or, as Nizhnikau & Moshes (2020: 49) explore, whether Belarus may become a "Crimea 2.0" and are eventually incorporated into Russia, but importantly, all of this will be dependent on whether Lukashenka and Putin can both continue to ensure regime survival in the coming years. But, when it comes to regime survival, due to a preference of Lukashenka over all opposition (Sierakowski, 2020: 15), the Kremlin will support Lukashenka if he matches Russia's interests (something which a pro-Western political agenda would not), and with Lukashenka determined to do anything to stay in power, pro-Russian relations are likely to remain (Dryndova et al, 2021: 5). However, as previously discussed, the Kremlin still has the capability to remove Lukashenka at any moment, even if the Belarusian regime are matching Russia's interests, so regime survival for Lukashenka is still not fully guaranteed during this new stage of the cycle.

Due to the uncertainty surrounding these events at this stage, it is difficult to predict the direction of this new stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations and whether the cycle will continue or possibly end with either a permanent pro-Russian or pro-Western outlook. Dryndova et al (2021: 6) acknowledge the key drivers that will shape the direction of this new stage, and any further stages, of relations including public opinion and the level of social mobilisation in Belarus; the macroeconomic situations including financial stability and the impact of sanctions; the potential for democratic reforms, constitutional changes, and new political opposition; the migration crisis or other provocative events; and negotiations between the West and Russia on Belarus. Whilst these drivers are unpredictable, they will be key in the development of stage 4 of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. But, if the outcome of these drivers do not prevent Belarus further integrating with Russia through the Union State agreement, or if Belarus was to be incorporated into Russia as a “Crimea 2.0”, then it is likely that soon we would see the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations would come to an end.

However, there is an alternative possibility due to the changing attitudes of the Belarusian people. Whilst Pro-Western and Pro-Russian orientations have not always had a strong impact on Belarusian society and the political opinions of Belarusians (Zogg, 2018: 4), the events of 2020-22 have altered this, with the geopolitical orientations of Belarusian citizens now holding a much greater level of influence and importance (Dryndova et al, 2021: 6). As a result, the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations may come to an end, but only after the completion of the pro-Russian stage 4, however long this lasts, and the beginning of a pro-Western stage 5.

Balmaceda et al (2020: 10) argue that the current pro-Russian stage is simply delaying the rooting of a permanent pro-Western preference in Belarusian society, but it should also be noted that any pro-Western consolidation will take time. Here, the end of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations would be caused through the changing demographics of Belarus since younger people tend to be much more supportive of Europeanising Belarus. For example, 70% of young Belarusians strongly reject any form of union with Russia (compared to roughly 30% of all Belarusians, as seen in Figure 12), and 50.4 percent of younger Belarusians (aged 35 and under) favour stronger ties with the West (Balmaceda et al, 2020: 10). Balmaceda et al (2020: 9-10), further state that the growing pro-EU aspirations amongst the youth indicate that Belarusian’s ambivalence towards the country’s foreign policy may eventually come to an end with a consolidation of a permanent pro-Western outlook, which would in effect end the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations during a fifth stage.

The growing pro-Western geopolitical orientation of young people is also acknowledged in a study on the next generation of diplomats in the Eastern Partnership by Hosa et al (2021). In their study, a young Belarusian diplomat emphasises how young Belarusians are not carriers of the Soviet cultural code and would rather see Belarus less dependent on Russia, and instead to have close and mutually beneficial relations with the EU and the US (Hosa et al, 2021: 6). In theory, not only will these younger diplomats be part of the generation that increases public opinion towards the West, but the diplomats will be the ones who enact policy to ensure a permanent pro-Western outlook and push the country in what young diplomats call the “right direction” (Hosa et al, 2021: 10-11).

However, as Hosa et al (2021: 10) point out, a permanent, pro-Western stage 5 may not be ensured because of the young diplomats who have resigned or been dismissed due to the political crisis, and the impact this has on the implementation of policy. Similarly, Balmaceda et al (2020: 10) suggest that the West’s inconsistent engagement with the Lukashenka regime, and its indecisiveness over the future of Belarus, could prevent a pro-Western rooting. This could imply that how the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations ends may be determined by Western actions. If the West responds appropriately, however that may be defined, Belarusian society has the potential to become permanently pro-Western; nevertheless, if the West remains indecisive, the Belarusian regime may adopt a permanent pro-Russian viewpoint. However, if the Belarusian and Russian regimes do not seize the opportunity afforded by the West's weakness, the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian ties may continue for many more years and stages.

8.2 Lukashenka’s Adaptive Authoritarianism

Lukashenka and his adaptive authoritarianism remain a major impediment to the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations concluding in a permanent pro-Western stage. Lukashenka, who will always return to Russian support despite still publicly refusing to commit to East or West as part of his juggling strategy, will not allow a permanent pro-Western geopolitical view to be solidified, particularly if it is based on domestic opposition support. Further, Lukashenka knows that the Russian regime would likely find a way to oust him if the Belarusian regime showed signs of a permanent pro-Western shift (Wilson, 2021: 296). However, because Lukashenka is only interested in maintaining power, his opportunism and adaptive authoritarianism, whether through totalitarian, egalitarian nationalism, or a biopoliticisation

strategy, will ensure his regime's survival and further prevent the possibility of permanent pro-Western relations.

Interestingly, prior to the invasion of Ukraine, there had been internal discussions whether the next phase of the Belarusian political crises, that had begun in 2020, would be a phase of regime transition, following a new constitutional referendum that took place on 27 February 2022. That said, analysts from outside of Belarus argued that the referendum would not bring Belarus any closer to a political transition but would instead consolidate even more power in Lukashenka's hands (Liubakova, 2022). Here, the constitutional changes proposed aimed to weaken the powers of the Belarusian parliament and create a new centre of power amongst an All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which would allow Lukashenka to remain politically relevant even if he decided to step down as president (Leukavets, 2022: 7). The 2022 constitutional referendum also highlights that the Lukashenka regime adopts adaptive authoritarianism. This is despite some scholars, such as Silitski, previously arguing that the Lukashenka regime actually adopts pre-emptive authoritarianism where the regime's strategy is to combat an anticipated political challenge, even if there is no immediate danger to the regime, through attacks on opponents, infrastructure, and civil society (Silitski, 2006: 5-6).

The referendum was ordered in response to the mass protests and changing political opinions during 2020/21 in attempt to solidify Lukashenka's position that was being pushed for by the Kremlin (Liubakova, 2022). This demand, and subsequent reactions, further show that a new stage of pro-Russian relations had begun. Although, Russia had also demanded that Lukashenka amends the constitution to provide an opportunity for a transfer of power and reduce the power of the Belarusian presidency (Liubakova, 2022). Prior to the referendum, Lukashenka did not say if he would stand down, but the current political instability in the region as a result of the invasion of Ukraine has meant that Lukashenka will remain in power, at least until the end of his term in 2025, and the new constitutional changes as a result of the referendum will allow Lukashenka to stay in power, if he and the Kremlin so desire, until at least 2035 (Leukavets, 2022: 8).

These constitutional changes in response to the political crisis show that Lukashenka's regime is indeed an example of adaptive authoritarianism. Furthermore, this example not only confirms the new pro-Russian stage of the cyclicity of relations but also provides another suggestion of how long this current stage of pro-Russian relations may last. With Lukashenka ordering a framework that would allow him to maintain power until 2035, this suggests that

the current pro-Russian stage will last for over a decade, and perhaps for around 14 years, in a similar timespan to the previous pro-Russian stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

The political use of the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC by the Belarusian regime have both shown the existence of adaptive authoritarianism. For example, the 2014 tournament was heavily adapted following the crisis in Crimea, and this was signified with the first major use of the Belarusian language in 20 years, and a careful removal of any Russian references. Meanwhile, the 2021 tournament demonstrates adaptive authoritarianism in action even more clearly, because if the Belarusian regime was pre-emptive in nature, they would have acknowledged the upcoming presidential election when acquiring the hosting rights in 2017, and that the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations would soon shift again. As such, under pre-emptive authoritarianism, the regime would have prepared, and constructed the tournament, on a fully pro-Russian political agenda rather than the pro-Western political agenda they proceeded with during their initial co-host unity with Latvia. Yet, when the political circumstances changed following the election in 2020, their political use of the tournament was adapted to respond to the new pro-Russian stage of relations and the political threat now posed by a domestic opposition.

The changes shown in the two tournaments are in line with the understanding of adaptive authoritarianism whereby the Lukashenka regime can adapt and shift the balance of different factors to allow the regime to maintain their power, contain opposition, and encourage popular support (Bennett, 2020: 794). There was a shift in the balance of their political agenda and geopolitical preferences to keep power across both tournaments, there were examples of restraining the opposition through nationalist rhetoric, and popular support was gained through greater investment and economic performance. Neither of these actions can be considered pre-emptive, but in defence of Silitski's belief that the Lukashenka regime is an example of pre-emptive authoritarianism, Silitski (2006: 36) did argue that pre-emptive authoritarianism would eventually 'run out of steam,' but it was difficult to predict when and where at the time they presented their arguments. The adaptive political use of the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC by the Belarusian regime may therefore suggest that any pre-emptive authoritarianism came to an end before the new pro-Western cycle of relations in 2014, but, if not, for certain by 2021. Perhaps this is part of what Wilson (2021: 305) referred to when he explained that the skillset of the dictator has been changing in recent years.

Throughout Lukashenka's reign and the IIHFWCs, aspects of authoritarianism have been on show, none more so than the biopoliticisation of society. However, the biopoliticisation of society has highlighted another construct of Lukashenka in keeping with his neo-soviet approach under the role of *Batka*, which is Belarusian for "father." Acting as *Batka* allows Lukashenka to be viewed as the nation's father, allowing him to balance various ideological approaches and build a nation on his own terms while preserving aspects of Soviet Belarusian identity (Wilson, 2021: 302-3). Lukashenka's ability to use bio-politics has been enhanced by his *Batka* position, since he is considered as a justifiable person to protect society from a threat.

The biopoliticisation of society and the role of *Batka* have all played a significant role in the construction of Lukashenka's regime, but how surprising should this be given Lukashenka's aim to preserve a Soviet heritage, and the Soviet Union's reliance on father figures and biopolitics? (Bergman, 1998: 149; Zhang, 2021: 650). If the adaptive authoritarian examples are not convincing enough, Lukashenka's desire to promote a Soviet legacy has been demonstrated through sport and the regime's political exploitation of the IIHFWCs.

The Soviet Union used sport as a crucial component of foreign policy, with cultural representations being used as the forefront of national, and international propaganda campaigns (O'Mahony, 2006: 151). There was a culture where sport was used as a platform to promote and direct Soviet messaging, but also a culture where sport was used as a tool to begin forging relationships with major international organisations, regardless of their political leanings (O'Mahony, 2006: 152). This approach can still be found in Belarus through national membership of many sporting organisations, and use of mega-events such as the 2014 IIHFWC, to forge new partnerships. This shows that the Soviet Union's approaches to sport are the origins of the Belarusian regime's contemporary approaches to sport, and that there has been minimal change in many areas, since the Soviet Union's legacy has significantly influenced modern-day Belarus's use of sport.

The Soviet Union also used sport to attain a measure of recognition and prestige internationally (Koch, 2013: 43) and this is something that is still visible in Belarus today, as the Belarusian regime takes a similar approach to advancing their diplomacy, and expressing themselves, through the hosting of mega-events, such as the Ice Hockey World Championships. In doing so, it has allowed Lukashenka to highlight socio-economic achievements of the regime to build public support to ensure regime survival, and following a collapse in relations with Russia, has

also allowed Belarus to improve its external image and engagements with the West (Nizhnikau & Alvari, 2016: 80).

In another way to ensure regime survival, which may link to international recognition, the Soviet Union used sporting images to present a rivalry with others (Arnold, 2018: 129). In such circumstances, sport has the aim to either out-produce, out-score or just generally out-do an opposition through direct opposition in the sporting arena, or through othering (Howell, 1975: 143). Recently, by putting the blame for the removal of the 2021 IIHFWC on Tsikhanouskaya, the Lukashenka regime is using a similar tactic to that of the Soviet Union's. As such, this represents another sign that the politicisation of sports in Belarus follows Soviet legacies. In the same way the Soviet Union had no hesitancy in admitting their politicisation of sport, neither has Lukashenko with the Belarusian regime consistently stating that Belarusian sport can be used to help promote national interests in foreign policy (Belarus.by, 22 September 2015).

8.3 The Future of the Politicisation of Sport

As stated in the theoretical framework, if a country is experiencing the construction of a neo-Soviet society, then we would expect to find the politicisation of sport to contain Soviet legacies and techniques as has been the case in Belarus. Consequently, the Soviet legacies on display in the politicisation of sport by the Belarusian regime may form a solid basis for a new definition of the politicisation of sport from an Eastern perspective. Although this study had intended to provide this new definition from an Eastern perspective, due to data limitations, as I will later discuss, this has not been possible, but in replacement, this thesis has highlighted how the post-Soviet sporting models may act as an alternative, more suitable, replacement.

As stated in the theoretical framework, there are three possible post-Soviet models; post-Soviet presidentialism, neo-liberal, and transitional. The case studies shown indicate that the Belarusian regime have adopted a post-Soviet presidentialism model. According to Rodriguez-Diaz et al (2020: 5) and Riordan (1980: 348), this model would see public officials, who oversee a weakly governed society and are identified in symbolic imagery with a widely publicised leader, involved in the management of sporting events and organisations where they would specifically attempt to build confrontation between East and West, despite being denounced by international sporting bodies.

All these traits of a post-Soviet presidentialism model have been visible in the Belarusian regime's political use of the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC, thus confirming the use of the model by the regime. For example, Belarusian society has been weak as shown in the political stability index (Figure 1), with Lukashenka the widely publicised leader identified by symbolic imagery, as shown with the references to state colours in the discussion on Volat in 2014 and the flag controversy in 2021. The tournaments were also used by the regime to build confrontation between East and West, as shown with the conspiracy theories and othering towards Western states in 2021, which, in line with the model, saw the Belarusian regime denounced by the IIHF when Minsk lost the co-hosting rights for the 2021 IIHFWC.

In replacement of an Eastern perspective definition of the politicisation of sport, the post-Soviet presidentialism model can help explain the actions and intentions of the Belarusian regime when it comes to mega-events. This model may also help explain further politicisation of sport in the Eastern, post-Soviet sphere, with Rojo-Labaien (2020) and Horak (2020) discussing the use of a post-Soviet presidentialism approach in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, respectively. Further, these models may turn out to be more suitable than a separate Eastern perspective definition of the politicisation of sport, since if we look further at the differences between a post-Soviet presidentialism model and a neo-liberal model, we can begin to distinguish the differences between Eastern and Western perspectives on the politicisation of sport.

Despite being associated with the post-Soviet region, Latvia has adopted a much stronger, permanent pro-Western geopolitical approach. This is evidenced by their use of the neoliberal post-Soviet sporting model, which largely replicates a Western sporting model, and strong indications of positive geopolitical relations with the West, as demonstrated in 2021 when Latvia joined Western partners in challenging the Belarusian regime. As for the neo-liberal/Western model, firstly there will be democratic governments, who do not feel the need to involve public officials in all management of sport, and a neo-liberal approach to economics (Rodriquez-Diaz et al, 2020: 4) with Latvia, and their organisation of the 2021 IIHFWC, aligning with both aspects. Further, under a neo-liberal model, sport will protect and promote the interests of society but will also be heavily commercialised for economic purposes (Drozda et al, 2020), and rather than create confrontation between East and West, mega-events will be used to promote neo-liberal ideas and beliefs (John & McDonald, 2018: 1184). In 2021, Latvia, unlike Belarus, demonstrated a determination to protect society's interests by demanding for Minsk's removal as a co-host, and saw the tournament commercialised by accepting Western sponsors, both of which reflect the political and economic promotion of neoliberal concepts

and values. This, consequently, showed how different post-Soviet models will approach the same tournament in different manners. Hence, why I would now suggest that post-Soviet sporting models can help view the politicisation of sport from an Eastern perspective and indicate how and why an Eastern perspective differs from a Western perspective.

My wider argument here is that sporting models can be used theoretically to understand political actions regarding mega-events. This, however, brings us to the debated question of how politically successful are mega-events? For the success of mega-events, it is difficult to make a full conclusion based on one regime's use of two events, but some indications can still be made based upon the Belarusian examples. Firstly, mega-events are a risk as they are usually initially frowned upon by the public due to high costs, as was shown prior to the 2014 IIHFWC in Minsk. But, if used correctly, mega-events can be extremely beneficial politically for governments as also shown in 2014 when the IIHFWC mega-event corresponded with an increase in political stability, effectiveness, and public support for the Belarusian regime. However, these successful benefits appear to be only a short term, rather than a long-term, impact.

Similarly, the cases of the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC show that whilst hosting a mega-event once can be politically successful, in the short-term at least, hosting the same event again soon after does not always provide the same success and/or benefits. The Belarusian regime had expected the 2021 IIHFWC to replicate the outcomes of the 2014 tournament straight from the moment of bid acquisition. However, this was not the case, and instead suggests that mega-events cannot be considered as a standalone foundation for political success, and that public support for mega-event hosting cannot be guaranteed, especially when a country is inundated with many, expensive mega-events in a short period of time, as Belarus has been. Lukashenka's use of the 2021 IIHFWC should act as a warning for political leaders who believe they can replicate the success of one mega-event with another soon after, and even more so considering that a replication of a mega-event can provide an easy base for the opposition to challenge incumbents for their own political gain and success. Whilst mega-events can be politically successful for incumbents, they can also be as equally, if not more, successful for political opposition. As a result, while determining if they are politically successful, we must analyse who they are successful for, as the IIHFWC was successful for the ruling regime in 2014, but the mega-event in 2021, despite being withdrawn from Belarus, was more successful for the domestic opposition.

There may also be questions about how successful the politicisation of mega-events may be for the sporting bodies who organise such events, such as the IIHF. Here, we could consider which of varying actions of the IIHF was most appropriate? Continuing with Minsk as a host in 2014 to avoid mixing sport and politics and “discriminating on political grounds”? Or, removing Minsk as a host in 2021 due to “safety and security” issues following political unrest? Unfortunately, there is no clear answer and a lot of it will depend on personal, or political opinion, and what is considered most beneficial to individual circumstances and agendas. This was emphasised by both the Belarusian authorities and Latvian/Western authorities who at one of the tournaments would either argue for or against the politicisation of the IIHFWC, before acting in the opposite manner at the next tournament.

While I believe sports and politics should be mixed to some extent, because politics, for example, allows for sporting infrastructure and development, I do not believe tournaments should be as heavily politicised as seen at the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC, and I would also question why major international bodies award tournaments to such controversial hosts in the first place. This is true not only for Belarus (where political repression and human rights violations had occurred for years prior to the 2021 tournament and 2017 bid acquisition), but also for FIFA with Russia and Qatar, and the IOC with the Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Yet, I do agree that the IIHF should protect supports and players at all costs, and against any risks, including risks due to political instability and conflict, but, if they feel the need to do this, they should be open and honest since it is well known that fans do not like the intrusion of politics into sports (Thorson & Serazio, 2018: 397). Instead of disguising decisions under the “safety issues”, the IIHF should be honest in their decisions to avoid any accusations of conspiracies, fraud, and a lack of transparency. Such honesty may also discourage future controversial bids from attempting to host mega-events and would also be welcomed by fans, and participants across the world. An example of such a situation occurred on 26 April 2022 when the IIHF removed the 2023 IIHFWC from St Petersburg, Russia, due to the invasion of Ukraine, with the IIHF stating that their decision was out of concern for the safety and well-being of players, officials, media, and fans, but with no mention of the political circumstances.

Consequently, many famous sports people responded with suggestions of how the IIHF should have made the announcement, even if such responses may also be viewed as controversial. For example, Tim Sparv, a former captain of Finland’s national football team and a major ice hockey fan, tweeted the IIHF with a ‘statement edit’ (shown in Figure 14) to add that the

tournament has been removed from “a nation that is ruled by a tyrant and starts a war against an innocent neighbour” before indicating that the IIHF should acknowledge that Russia currently is not an appropriate host of a major sporting event.

Figure 13: IIHF Council Statement on the withdrawal of the 2023 IIHFWC hosting rights from Russia and Tim Sparv’s response.



Source: @TimSparv, twitter.com

The recent withdrawal of Russia from hosting the 2023 IIHFWC may soon provide an opportunity for a replication study, with a possible comparison of the Belarusian regime's political use of an IIHFWC tournament following the withdrawal of hosting rights, and whether the Russian regime will use the recent IIHF decision for political purposes, and if so, whether they will take the same post-Soviet presidentialism approach. In any case, compared to 2014, the IIHF's decision in 2021, and now in 2023, demonstrates the altering attitude of how major sporting organisations have responded to political crises. Or, in other words, the IIHF has also been ‘moving the goalposts’ when it comes to sport and politics.

The IIHF's mixing of sport and politics was extended even further when the Belarusian and Russian national teams were barred from competing in the 2022 IIHFWC in Finland, demonstrating yet another step toward mixing sport and politics and discriminating on political grounds that considers not only *hosting* rights, but also *participating* rights. Many may argue that the teams are not associated with the respective regimes, and therefore why should they be punished through exclusion? Perhaps the exclusion of the two national ice hockey teams who have close links with their country's regimes confirms the presence of a post-Soviet presidentialism model where the regimes have officials actively involved in the sporting organisations and teams, such as the BIHA and BIHF, and therefore the sporting bodies wish to denounce these officials through their decision? Or does this just show that the changing attitudes and approaches towards sport and politics can be understood in a manner where the politicisation of sport now includes the exclusion of anyone who has the slightest link to political controversies, regardless of the sporting model in use? Maybe such an attitude is contributing to why so much of the politicisation of sport is seen through negative actions, such as othering, rather than the positive impacts the politicisation of sport can provide, as noted in the theoretical framework for this study. Either way, if, as Grix (2015: 17) states, those who believe that sport and politics should be kept separate at all costs have found the last few decades difficult, it appears that they will find the new few decades even more challenging.

8.4 Study Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research

The most difficult component of this study has been limited data access due to sanctions imposed on Belarus and subsequent actions by the Belarusian regime following the invasion of Ukraine. Whilst my adjustment in data selection (as mentioned on page 56) was out of my control, it had no bearing on the overall research design. An alternative data selection based on statements and reports from international broadcasters and governments, as well as business data, has been shown to be applicable to comparative case studies the geopolitical code technique, with the change in data having no effect on the analysis of hypotheses or the ability to answer the research questions.

However, more specific data on the two cases under consideration could aid the advancement of this field of study, but due to time constraints, this research could only use data that was easily and publicly accessible. As a result, the data may appear ambiguous in some cases, and

despite best attempts, it may be impossible to distinguish between correlation and causality. To overcome this, more data could be used, but because the initial data was restricted during the research stage of my study, I did not have time to identify and access a considerable number of alternative data sources.

This limitation has been affected the capacity to evaluate and assess the politicisation of sport from an Eastern, post-Soviet perspective. Although, this is not to say that any Western perspectives should be discredited as my research design has still been successful. But one of the aims, although not a requirement within this field of study, of this thesis was to address the politicisation of sport in Eastern Europe from a fresh viewpoint, employing non-Western data sources and understandings rather than a Western-centered approach. However, due to the restrictions on data access, this has been difficult, and as a result, more research into the theory and application of the politicisation of sport from an Eastern perspective would be valuable. Although, as I have demonstrated, I would further emphasise that the post-Soviet sporting models are as equally suitable of providing an Eastern perspective of the politicisation of sport.

While this thesis has demonstrated the difficulty of conducting such further research, it can nonetheless help to encourage future research on the politicisation of sport from an Eastern viewpoint by identifying the requirements for studying sport in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space through an Eastern perspective. For example, more Eastern scholarship (though this may require overcoming the language barrier), personal experiences and viewpoints from those in the region rather than international broadcaster reporting, and a deeper understanding of the sporting history of the post-Soviet space, with sporting infrastructure and models understood from a contextual point of view should all be included.

To support this, and further research, we could draw upon work from Bonnell and Breslauer (1998), who explain how new methods of inquiry will be required for post-Soviet studies. In their essay, Bonnell and Breslauer (1998: 29) explore how post-Soviet studies involves unique and complex phenomena which cannot be analysed through a single framework or disciplinary perspective. This is also noted by Goshulak (2003: 492) who states that there is a false assumption that Western theories and approaches will always be somewhat valid for the post-Soviet context.

Alternatively, to help provide Eastern perspectives in any study, we can also acknowledge the challenges to post-Soviet studies made by Goshulak (2003: 491) who states that to ensure an Eastern perspective is provided in any study, post-Soviet projects should be linked to those of

the Soviet Union and provide theoretical discussions on Soviet nationalism and consequent nationalities model. Further, the study of post-Soviet phenomena should look at both state and society, not as separate social processes but instead as part of the connection between Soviet and post-Soviet state building experiences (Goshulak, 2003: 492).

In the same, or related, topic as this thesis, an Eastern perspective may also be more achievable if more data can be obtained specifically from the time of a mega-event, but as this thesis looked at historical mega events, this was not possible. An ethnographic, or similar qualitative approaches, could be applied at the time of any mega-events to gain research into the real perspectives of the attendees and organisers (Sands, 2002). This will allow a further in-depth understanding of personal experiences, and viewpoints, to help construct a more Eastern perspective of phenomena surrounding mega-events. For this study, I could have conducted interviews with Belarusian attendees (or possibly officials) who were present at the 2014 event, but, because of Belarus's challenging political situation, freedom of speech and interaction with scholars from other countries has been severely curtailed, including some cases where the Belarusian regime has imprisoned academics, researchers, and students those who have spoken out against the regime (Congdon, 2013: 5). As a result, I decided not to do interviews with Belarusians owing to the potential ethical risk they could pose.

Still, the methodology for this thesis is appropriate due to the separate theme of the Belarusian regime's political objective, and is also completely valid for the research questions, hypotheses, and analysis, even with the data access limitations. If circumstances allow inclusion of additional qualitative approaches in the study of politicisation of sport may lead to assessments of different methodologies that could be utilised to investigate the topic from a Western and/or Eastern perspective. A major question in political science and the politicisation of sport is "how does sport fit into our understanding of international politics?" (Cha, 2009: 1583), and only by examining a variety of data, methods, and techniques can this question be answered.

Different perspectives are also at the centre of the further study possibilities in addition to the opportunities previously mentioned. One potential that has arisen because of this thesis is to investigate the same phenomena from a Latvian perspective. Given that the Latvian regime has openly admitted to using the 2021 IIHFWC for political purposes, and that the Belarusian regime has also accused Latvia of politicising the tournament (as presented on pages 78 and 86), more research could be conducted under the title *The Latvian Politicisation of the 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship*. Such a study would not only show how much each side was

politicising the tournament and how successful they were, but it would also provide a useful comparison between Western and post-Soviet sport politicisation, as well as the differing political agendas of post-Soviet states on opposite sides of the geopolitical divide. Previous research on the politicisation of Latvian ice hockey has been achieved, such as Brencis & Ozols (2010) who look at how Dinamo Riga promotes Latvian identity through nation branding, and Fuks (2013), who looks at how Latvian-Russian relations are re-emerging through ice hockey, therefore, a study looking at Latvian politicisation of an ice hockey mega-event would be a valuable addition to this field and topic.

Future research might also compare Belarus to another country with pro-Russian ties and a post-Soviet presidentialism sport model to see if the strategies and methods for politicising sport are the same. For example, comparing Azerbaijan's politicisation of mega-events, such as major UEFA matches and the Azerbaijani Formula One Grand Prix, for political purposes (Rookwood, 2021: 10). Similarly, a comparison might be drawn between Belarus and post-Soviet countries that follow a different sporting model. For example, Ukraine, who gained experience of hosting a mega-event with the 2012 UEFA European Championship. A more detailed, evolving geopolitical comparison with Ukraine may also be appropriate for future research, but I do not believe it is appropriate at this time owing to the high sensitivity and uncertainty surrounding the conflict in Ukraine. As a result, I have avoided discussing Belarus-Ukraine relations or doing a comparative discussion of the two countries at this time.

9. Conclusion

This thesis has shown how the Belarusian regime, led by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, has lately entered a new pro-Russian stage of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations between 2020 and 2021, following a pro-Western stage that had been noticeable since 2014. This has been illustrated, notably through the politicisation of sport and through understanding how the regime has used sport, specifically the 2014 and 2021 Ice Hockey World Championships, for political ends.

It has been demonstrated through the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations that the Belarusian regime will consistently shift between expressing pro-Western and pro-Russian relations, which may surprise some people given that many simply see Belarus as a permanent Russian puppet state (Liakhovich, 2014: 119), and assume Belarus to simply be the heir of the Soviet Union (Lind, 2021: 4). But, as shown throughout the theoretical framework of this thesis and supported by the comparative case study analysis, since Lukashenka came to power in Belarus in 1994, Belarus has spent nearly just as much time promoting pro-Western relations as it has promoting pro-Russian relations.

Nonetheless, while the concept of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations has previously been studied, with valuable contributions on previous stages from Wilson (2021), Snapkouski (2021), and Nice (2012), the latest stage has received little attention, despite the growing political implications that the Belarusian regime's geopolitical direction holds. With the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, and tensions between Russia and its neighbours, the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations will have far more serious consequences than ever before, not just for the politics of Belarus and the post-Soviet region, but for the politics of Europe as a whole, and possibly even the rest of the world. As a result, I believe it is critical to further this concept and how we can detect changes in the cycle, as well as to consider the characteristics and impacts of both pro-Western and pro-Russian stages of the cycle. This is a phenomenon that could have gone unnoticed if it was not for the value of case studies to aid our understanding of geopolitical events, thus emphasising Stafford's (2013: 2) argument about the importance of comparative case study analysis as previously explained in this thesis.

But why has Lukashenka embraced the changes of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations? The answer is simply that Lukashenka is an opportunist who has adopted an adaptive style of authoritarianism to ensure that his regime's political agenda of forming international

partnerships, nation-building, and regime survival can be met. Here, both pro-Western and pro-Russian relations can help achieve the political agenda, although this will be through different manners, as set out in the theoretical framework and confirmed in the selected hypotheses.

However, due to Lukashenka's refusal to publicly choose between East and West (Zogg, 2018: 1), and the general avoidance of geopolitical discourse in Belarusian politics (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021: 2), it is difficult to acknowledge any shifts in the Belarusian regime's political agenda through the classic public spheres of politics, such as parliaments, parties, and governments. Nevertheless, examples of the regime moving the goalposts of their political agenda can be witnessed through an outside sphere, such as sport. Hence, why Senn (1999: 205) has stated that Belarus should no longer be considered through the *Russkiy Mir* concept, for example, but instead through a "Sporty Mir" concept.

The Belarusian regime has used global sporting mega-events, such as the Ice Hockey World Championships, to promote its political agenda in both pro-Western and pro-Russian stages of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations. Hence, why this thesis has investigated how the Belarusian regime uses sport for political ends, and specifically to promote each aspect of its political agenda including international partnerships, nation building, and regime survival. Consequently, the answer to these questions have also highlighted how the Belarusian regime's politicisation of sport can signify the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations, with this thesis specifically showing how a pro-Western stage was visible through the politicisation of the 2014 IIHFWC, and a pro-Russian stage visible through the politicisation of the 2021 IIHFWC, all in line with the existing theory of the politicisation of sport regarding power for change, sporting diplomacy, soft power, nation-building, and the use of mega-events.

The analysis has demonstrated that during a pro-Western stage, sport can be used as a platform to create new international partnerships, where Western partners will be the dominant priority of Belarusian policy and promote a *Rzeczpospolita* nation-building process. Here, sporting mega-events provide an opportunity to interact with new potential partners who they would not meet at a political event, and further, sport can provide a platform to promote symbols (such as language and history in the case of Volat the 2014 tournament mascot) that represent Belarusian identity. During a pro-Western stage, sport is also used to achieve regime survival that can be guaranteed through an increase in public support and that can be maintained by a feel-good factor created by sporting success, and the improvement on infrastructure as part of a mega-event.

Meanwhile, during a pro-Russian stage, sport is used as a platform to promote dominant, Eastern international partnerships while also promoting visible resistance to undesirable Western partners. Similarly, sport will be used to promote its nation-building process, but at this point, the promotion will be of a Russkiy Mir identity with anti-Western rhetoric. The main difference between how sport is used in the two possible stages of the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian ties, however, is in terms of regime survival. Unlike the attempts to increase public support during the pro-Western stage, sport is utilised to establish a biopolitical society in which Lukashenka can be safeguarded, with sport also offering a platform for countless discursive attacks on political opponents, such as associating opponents with sporting failures.

Yet, regardless of the stage of the cycle, and the technique used to achieve the political agenda, the analysis has further demonstrated how the Belarusian regime have adopted a post-Soviet presidentialism sporting model. This has been particularly shown through the heavy political involvement of regime officials in sporting events, and the confrontation that has been witnessed between East and West at both the 2014 and 2021 IIHFWC. As shown, the politicisation of sport from Eastern, neo-Soviet countries is vastly different to the liberal sporting model adopted by Western countries. Therefore, this thesis has shown how the post-Soviet presidentialism sport model can explain an Eastern perspective of the politicisation of sport and can help explain why regimes uses mega-events to promote their political agenda.

Still, such mega-events have been a long debated political tool, with Lauermaann (2019) and Penfold (2019), amongst others, questioning whether they can be politically successful. In this thesis, in a clear example of political science in action, the case studies and selected data have shown that mega-events can be politically successful when it comes to 1) *political stability*, 2) *government effectiveness*, and 3) *increasing public support*. For example, in Case Study 1, the 2014 IIHFWC was a contributing factor in increasing the stability of the Belarusian regime and reducing the risk of collapse; increasing government effectiveness to allow for greater policy implementation; and most importantly, increased public support for the regime ahead of an upcoming presidential election.

However, as shown in the comparative analysis with Case Study 2 and the 2021 IIHFWC, the successful impacts of mega-events for ruling regimes appear to only endure in the short-term, rather than the long term. Similarly, whilst one mega-event can provide some short-term successes, the Belarusian use of multiple mega-events, has appeared to show that repeating mega-events will not be politically successful. Case Study 2 also demonstrated that when it

comes to the politicisation of sport, mega-events can just be as successful for a political opposition as they can be for ruling regimes. This was particularly shown to be the case when the methods of politicising sport change from techniques such as using a tournament to improve and develop infrastructure, to using a tournament as a platform to suppress political opponents.

The comparative case study analysis also showed that it was not only the Belarusian regime who have been moving the goalposts when it comes to politics. As sport and politics become even more heavily dependent upon each other, major sporting organisations, such as the IIHF, have also acted similarly. Despite protests from supporters and politicians across Europe in 2014, the IIHF refused to remove Minsk as the IIHFWC host, stating that they do not discriminate on political grounds; however, in 2021, this ground was broken by the IIHF, who, after emphasising that tournaments could not be moved for political reasons (Crane, 2020), removed the tournament due to "safety and security issues". Whilst these precise issues were not defined, it is believed this was due to the political circumstances and external pressures on the IIHF (Belsat, 18 January 2021). Here, the political circumstances in Belarus remained similar in 2021 compared with 2014, but the actions of the IIHF had changed.

Recently this has also extended further, with the IIHF excluding the Belarusian national team from participating at the 2022 IIHFWC due to the Belarusian involvement in Ukraine. The IIHF's previous position of not discriminating on political grounds has been weakened further, with political grounds now including not only hosting rights, but also participating rights, with players who are not involved in politics or have influence over political decisions being discriminated against. This shows that the Western, liberal position that presented the separation of sport and politics (Beck, 2005: 178), is no longer in play.

But what has caused the change in approach from the IIHF? Here, a multitude of possibilities has been acknowledged, including that the IIHF could simply be attempting to improve their image amongst supporters by responding to public opinion, with many supporters outraged at who has received the hosting rights. Similarly, this could have been in a growing response to the belief that sport should simply send a message that it is no longer willing to be associated with dictators (Crane, 2020). Or is there is a possibility that the politicisation of sport has also occurred amongst sporting organisations, and that the difference between the IIHF's change in approach towards Minsk in 2014 and 2021 was influenced by the accusations of corruption between the IIHF President, Rene Fasel, and Lukashenka, which had overshadowed the 2014 tournament? Whilst this thesis could not conclude why there was such a specific change in

approach, or why the IIHF and other major sporting organisations insist on awarding mega-events to controversial hosts in the first place, this thesis has shown how there is an increasing mix of sport and politics by sporting organisations, and one that is likely to only increase.

Now, while both the Belarusian regime and the IIHF have moved the goalposts in terms of sport and politics, political scientists should consider doing the same, despite the criticism or slight hypocrisy that may result. However, this movement by political scientists would be considerably more positive and productive than the Belarusian regime and the IIHF.

Whilst clearly shown through the politicisation of sport and the 2021 IIHFWC, the most recent cyclical shift of Belarus-Russian relations had still not been widely noticed until the Belarusian involvement in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, possibly a year or two after the shift had begun and despite the known temporariness and *fait accompli* of Belarus' Western relations. However, the outcomes of this thesis' comparative case study analysis and geopolitical code analyses show how sport can reveal political phenomena that are not apparent in other contexts. As a result, there is a compelling case to be made that political scientists broaden their approach to sport by expanding their research into the field, because the study of sport and politics can highlight potential political consequences from a variety of geopolitical perspectives, not just the cyclicity of Belarus-Russian relations.

Political science should include, but not be limited to, studies conducted through the classic public sphere of parliament, parties, and government, and this thesis has supported Hartley's (1997: 82) assertion that political issues are beginning to emerge outside of this sphere. Consequently, this thesis has demonstrated how sport may be used as an example of an outer sphere in which politics can be addressed. This also indicates that Whannel (1983: 27) is correct in saying that "sport offers a way of seeing the world", and, in response to Cha's (2008: 30) argument that sport does not occupy politics classes at universities, I would argue that it is not too late to change this, particularly as even the most minor research into sport and politics can reveal major phenomena and new understandings.

Finally, this thesis has further supported Bairner, Kelly & Lee's (2017: 21) acknowledgement that sport can provide an opportunity for political science academics who are in search of deeper understandings of society; and as political complexities increase, and sport becomes increasingly more politicised, I sincerely hope that political science will further embrace this opportunity rather than miss this open goal that is currently in front of us.

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