

President Putin and Sochi 2014 PR

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I was torn between not watching the opening ceremony of Sochi 2014 because of Russia's deplorable gay and civil rights record and watching because all international relations PRs monitor big set piece national statements – particularly those of important nations such as Russia. An opening ceremony is a boon for political PRs because it is a host nation's once in a generation opportunity to trumpet a message/s. I watched Sochi 2014.

President Putin's pitch to Western lower middle and middle classes

Intriguingly, Russia appears to have pitched the visuals of its confident presentation solely at the West's lower middle and middle classes. Its political and historical narrative was so fudged and comprehensible, Julian Fellowes of Downton Abbey fame could have written the script, the only difference being he would have told its participants to smile. Russians taking part in the Sochi opening ceremony appeared to be too terrified to do so. 'Good' PR is at the very least looking as if you are enjoying yourself.¹

Compare Sochi's 'simple' chronological narrative, to, say, Danny Boyle's NHS story during the London Games 2012 with its well understood world message of classless diversity; or the equally confident presentation of the Beijing Games 2008 at which China showcased its cyber warfare capabilities (cyber warriors 'sold' as pretty lady cyber dancers) but concentrated a classless PR effort on Africa, doubtless because of the minerals and markets the continent offers. (Given that China is

¹ 'Good' PR, often mistaken for tokenism, is also about good manners. The German team 'talking' through its rainbow uniform and showing solidarity with gays in Russia and world-wide; the British team wearing a hat inspired by the heritage of host-nation Russia.

profoundly racist, it was astonishing how many times it turned its cameras on smiling black faces.) This was all the more noticeable because China's more usual rolling PR message is that of its Panda PR: cute cuddly pandas being loaned to zoos world-wide, including Edinburgh's, its subliminal subtext being that the Chinese are cute and cuddly, too.

Russia's Sochi 2014 pitch could not have been more externally singular. Unlike Britain's USP (unique selling point) during the London Games (the NHS; the country's diversity) or China's economic message during the Beijing Games 2008, Russia was filling a vacuum on the one hand and replacing a narrative on the other.

The vacuum is Western public knowledge of Russia and its people: the 'West' has lost control of the Lenin-to-Stalin message it was long able to tell its citizens, but Russia has been unable to replace it with a similarly lasting statement. Today, most Western citizens have never heard of Stalin. Courtesy of Hollywood, they may have heard of Lenin because they know the story of Tsar Nicholas and the fate of himself/family. Couple this information vacuum with a 'new' local narrative bankrolled in London by anti-Putin oligarchs such as the late Boris Berezovksy – ostentatious Russian philistines with too much money in their pockets rushing around London murdering innocent (!) oligarchs and spies – and Russia's image/PR is poor. (As importantly for the UK, it impacts on Anglo-Russian trade and friendship groups.) Hence the need for President Putin to find and promote a singular PR statement internationally which will be as enduring as ever the West's was.

Replacement narrative PR

Sochi 2014 has given President Putin the opportunity he needed to change Russia's PR game completely. Its opening ceremony was, in PR terms, commendably sophisticated. Where previously the 'West' was able to brand Russia as it wanted, the Sochi 2014 Opening Ceremony is, so far as I can make out, the first chance Russia has had to present its own message and USP worldwide.....on its own terms. As a result,

in London, especially with oligarch Boris Berezovsky dead and no longer bankrolling the anti-Putin PR machine crafted by Lord Bell,² the anti-Putin PR narrative of rich Russian thugs poisoning spies in London hotels can now, because of Sochi, be presented as (middle class) admirers of Tolstoy's lovely and innocent Natasha attending her first ball in *War and Peace*.

In PR terms, while neither narrative is true, a fabulous piece of narrative replacement is in progress. This falls on willing ears especially in London – not least because of the economic benefits many Russians bring, many Londoners approve of Russians making their home here; Russian children being schooled in Britain like and are liked by their British peers and know no other way of life. There will doubtless be a few post-Sochi media spoilers but these are likely to splutter out within a relatively short period.³

President Putin's global PR statement

As a result of Sochi, President Putin has been able to impose a Russian-inspired global PR statement by inserting a valid PR narrative replacing the one the West was able to impose throughout the Soviet era: that of its literature, music, ballet and history – including its peoples suffering and sacrifice during the Second World War, usually forgotten in the West's own retelling.

In PR terms, Russia can now use its history to favour it, rather than have it used against it as the West succeeded in doing; and use its heritage to support it. For example, where previously the West was able to remark upon, say, Russian pianists and writers unable to leave Soviet Russia or expelled from it (if not worse), as proof and virtuous reminder of the then Soviet Union's wickedness, President Putin's Russia can promote Tolstoy's genius in the same way as the UK loses no

² See 'The SIS and London-based Foreign Dissidents' in *Lobster* 65.

³ Over the next eighteen months, those wishing to monitor the UK's view of President Putin, which may/may not differ to its views on Russia, will be able to read its position, and the various factions involved, including PRs like Lord Bell, by watching its post-Sochi PR rebuttal.

opportunity to promote Shakespeare's.⁴

President Putin's Global Political PR Statement

Having showcased its history at Sochi, Russia can now begin to impose its USP. The one President Putin appears to have chosen is its heritage, long eschewed by Soviet era presidents and PRs. This dovetails with how Russians themselves, whether in Russia or overseas, wish to be presented – as middle class citizens interested in their heritage. Russia can do so because its heritage is coming relatively 'fresh' to western audiences.⁵

For international relations PRs, the political message President Putin chose to present at Sochi 2014 is one of the most fascinating political statements he has made since he came to power in 2000. In one of the opening ceremony's longest and most coherent set pieces he targeted the Russian Orthodox Church internally, and, externally: i.e. globally,

4 For those readers of a certain age, think chess master Natan Sharansky, or writer Alexander Solshenitsyn, once household names in the West but neither of whom are 'celebrities' in the West today. Also keep in mind that this is a two-way generational phenomenon. Young Eastern Europeans have absolutely no memory of Communism or the former Soviet system any more than Western ones do. A 21 year-old Croatian joiner with whom I was talking had little knowledge of Yugoslavia or Tito, even though Tito was a Croat by birth.

5 The UK does not have this advantage since it has already sold its heritage to death to bolster its tourism industry – remember then Prime Minister Blair's 'New Britannia' PR (1999/2000) as he tried to update Britain's image overseas: Britannia's lions are friendly rather than fierce. Since London 2012, the UK has ostentatiously ditched its former USP – Heritage PR – promoting instead its new USP, diversity and sport. Unlike Russia's USP which is supported by its people, this can be at odds with some Britons – e.g. those who support UKIP leader Nigel Farage and do not believe diversity (for which they mean multiculturalism) to be a bonus.....NB: As part of its updated Heritage PR, and for various reasons, UK presentation of the Royal Family for tourism purposes, has been removed from Celebrity PR into which it was hurtling before the brakes were applied (Kate Middleton as global celebrity) and re-hitched to the nation's history; e.g. the Thames river pageant 2013. Much to the fury of the country's tourism chiefs, the latter once in a life time spectacle was let down by the inadequacies of the commentators. At one time, Brit hacks such Richard and David Dumbleby knew part of their role was to boost the image of the UK; not so today's generation of commentators.

Orthodox and Catholic Christians, whether the latter be Anglo or Roman. The message to 'old' Christians could not have been more straightforward. Russia positioned itself not only as a Christian nation but as a defender of Christianity. Courtesy of the Sochi opening ceremony, it made clear publicly that it was in Christian partnership with the Vatican. (So far as I could tell, there was no such statement to people of other faiths, and certainly none to Islam despite the fact Russia has large Muslim communities.)

Trust Putin's Russia

This political message would not have been lost on one of the most troubled regions of the world – the Middle East. Here, principally as a result of the actions over a decade ago of 'Crusader' President Bush and his sidekick Prime Minister Blair (the immoral and illegal invasion of Iraq), the domino effect still in progress (now in Syria), has led to the decimation throughout the region of all ancient Middle Eastern Christian communities. This Christian community has long known it could trust the Vatican. Now it is being told it can trust President Putin's Russia too.

It conveyed its Christian PR statement in the Sochi opening ceremony as follows: depiction of a secular Troika, the cultural icon of Russia, as three horses pulling the sun emerge. This gives way to various dancers leading spectators towards representation of medieval Russian villages/towns. This becomes a representation of Moscow's iconic St Basil's Cathedral, built by Ivan the Terrible under whom Russia became a great empire. Included in the many internal subtexts was President Putin's PR pitch to the Russian Orthodox Church: it was central to Russia's history and glory. A century later, Ivan the Terrible's 'heir' is Peter the Great. Peter leads a cultural revolution that replaces some medieval and traditionalist systems with a modern, scientific, Europe-oriented one. Again, the internal subtext could not be clearer: like Peter the Great, President Putin is also leading a 'revolution'....

The Christian messaging of Sochi 'talked' to global

Christian communities, especially the ancient ones of the Middle East, more subtly as follows: when all the above was completed, their formation was held within and depicted by the sign of a fish. In Christianity, the fish is a secret symbol for persecuted believers.⁶ It is recognised the world over from, say, persecuted Christians in China and India, to those who are not persecuted in, say, Brazil, and who may be secular but have absorbed the cultural heritage of their grandparents' faith. Russia's political message could not have been more explicit: trust President Putin's Russia, it will do all it can to assist.⁷

Understandably, this message was lost on the BBC's Clare Balding commentating on the opening ceremony from Sochi. Perhaps of more consequence is the fact that it may also be lost on British journalists specialising in politics and/or international relations. Secularism is so ingrained in the UK we are unable to interpret non-secular messaging – this when religion could not be more political or our understanding of it more vital.

'The West' does not appear to realise it can no longer write the world's script. Certainly IMF chief Christine Lagarde failed to recognise this in her televised Dimpleby Lecture on 3 February 2014, where she gave her perspective on the major challenges facing the global economy. That 'the West' cannot write a script which does not talk down to others is worrisome; that it does not understand that others – e.g. President Putin – are writing scripts of their own, equally

6 Greeks, Romans and many other pagans used the fish symbol before Christians. Hence, unlike, say, the cross, it attracted little suspicion. Christians used the symbol to mark meeting places or to distinguish friends from foes.

7 It will be interesting to see what Russia's political message in Sochi 2014 closing ceremony will be and to which audience/s. Perhaps, having 'talked' to Christianity in the opening ceremony, Russia will have it both ways and 'talk' exclusively to other faiths, and/or Islam next time around? Whatever it goes for, including a singular one of nationalism (President Putin's Russia is best), or, say, bland neutrality (love/peace/togetherness etc.), most international relations/political PRs 'read' the opening and closing ceremony messages jointly, attaching equal importance to both, because the host nation usually weighs/balances the 'statements' with each other.

so.....especially when its lack of understanding of alternative language – e.g. religious – is taken into account. Those who are no longer writing the message at the very least have to understand those being written.

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