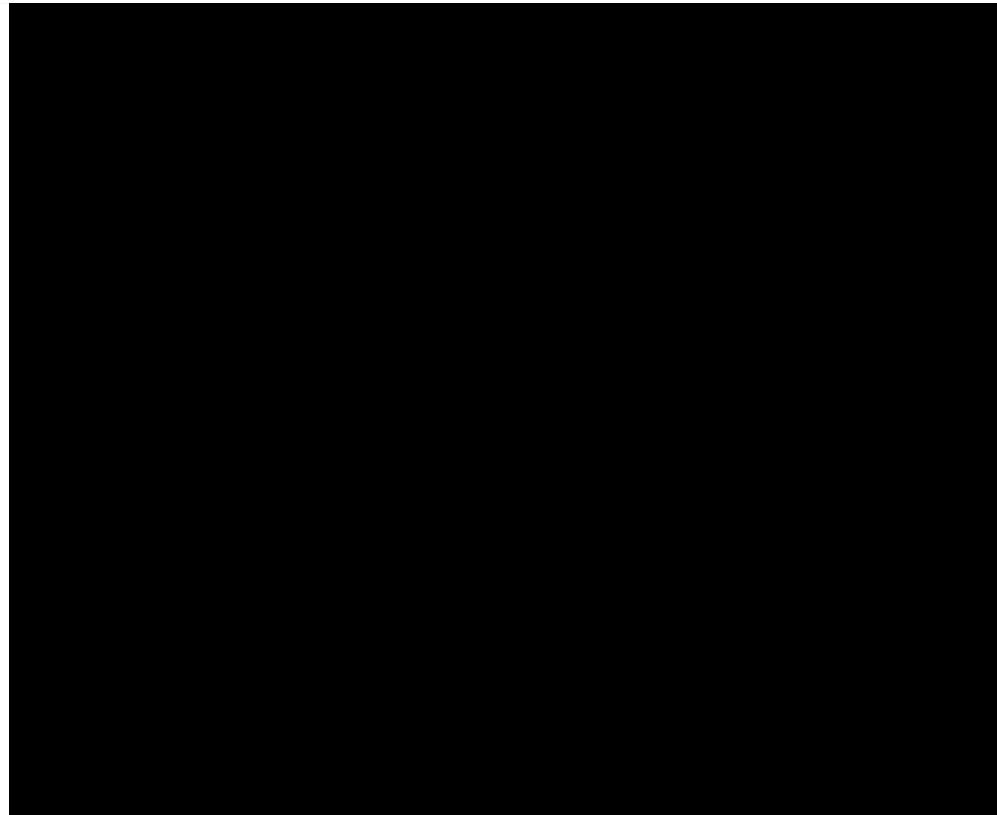


# World Cup won't give Putin global power

By Andrés Martinez

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Trump: I hope to meet with Putin in July 03:30

**Editor's Note:** Andrés Martinez is a [professor of practice](#) at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University and a fellow at [New America](#). The views expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.

**(CNN)** — Russia's World Cup is off to a mesmerizing start on the field -- in the first round of competition, the Russian team itself has exceeded its low expectations. Things have been a little rocky off the pitch -- Burger King Russia has just been [forced to apologize](#) for running an ad offering Russian women the chance to win a cash prize and Whoppers for life if they got impregnated by a World Cup star, not long after a senior Russian lawmaker exhorted Russian women to only sleep with Russian men during the World Cup "to give birth to our own" -- but overall, smoother perhaps than expected.

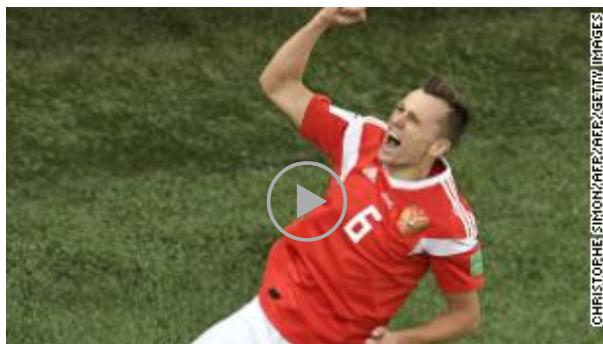
But no matter how successful the tournament turns out to be, President Vladimir Putin's gambit to leverage the soft power of international sport to burnish Russia's image abroad will fall well short of its ambitions. These major sporting events that capture global attention have long provided governments an opportunity to present a warm and fuzzy face to the world, but the world is already too familiar with Putin's regime -- the silencing of domestic critics, the annexation of Crimea, the support for Syria's murderous Bashar al-Assad, and the meddling in foreign elections -- to buy warm and fuzzy.

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athletes had been banned for drug use and those who were allowed to compete couldn't do so under their national flag.



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Some of the other objectionable behavior that has been attributed to Russia in advance of its World Cup seems to have been far more avoidable. The attempted killing (with a nerve agent, no less) of former Russian spy [Sergei Skripal and his daughter](#) on English soil in March incensed the West. It wasn't the first such attempt against Russians in England, which may explain both the level of ensuing outrage and why Russia may have been surprised by it (Russian authorities have denied any involvement in the attack).



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Putin's government has also diluted any sports-related goodwill dividends by its actions in other arenas. In the [immediate aftermath](#) of the Sochi Olympics, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine, triggering a series of sanctions from Western democracies, including Russia's expulsion from the G-8 group of nations. There is also the charge that Russian interests have spread fake news and deployed hackers to subvert Western democracies.

In terms of soccer, Russia had already scored a spectacular own-goal to its reputation in 2016, even as it was preparing to host this summer's World Cup. That summer, during the Euro Cup in France, thuggish Russian fans [went on a rampage](#) in Marseilles, beating up and intimidating fans from other nations. Worse, Russian officials back in Moscow [appeared to minimize](#) the seriousness of the incidents, if not to encourage the hooligans.

England couldn't bring itself to boycott the World Cup (the nation is too keen to break its history of heartache around its national team's failure to prevail in the sport it invented). But Theresa May's government did call for a state boycott (meaning no government ministers or members of the royal family would attend), which has severely diminished Putin's ability to leverage the World Cup as an opportunity to host fellow world leaders. Prince William scratched plans to attend (he is the [titular head](#) of the English Football Association), and no other English officials will be seen in Russia. Many other European heads of state, equally troubled by Moscow's chicanery, followed the English lead. Russian newscasts

those hardly compare -- no offense to them -- to the opportunity to pal around with Wills and Kate.

Russian misdeeds have also imperiled the most prestigious Russian-owned sports enterprise anywhere: the English Premier League's Chelsea FC. The British government, needing to appear tough in the absence of a full World Cup boycott, appears to have targeted Chelsea's owner, and close Putin associate, Roman Abramovich. The Russian billionaire has owned Chelsea since 2003 and long been a leading figure in the "Londongrad" playground for rich Russians. But this spring, the British government unexpectedly [refused to renew Abramovich's visa](#), preventing him from attending his team's FA Cup Final match against Manchester United last month. Chelsea has now called off a [billion-pound new stadium development](#), and it remains to be seen whether Abramovich will be forced to sell the club.



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Russia will surely derive some World Cup dividends in terms of international goodwill among foreign fans and a global TV audience treated over the month-long tournament to countless shots of breathtaking Russian backdrops. But the Kremlin's overall behavior over the past few years has not allowed it to capitalize on the global image-enhancement it might have hoped to attain from hosting an Olympics and a World Cup.

Then again, hosting these global sporting events also reaps tremendous propaganda dividends with the home audience. Much like previous undemocratic regimes that have hosted World Cups and Olympics -- [Argentina's odious military regime in 1978 comes to mind](#) -- Putin can point to the fact that the world comes to play in Russia as a sign that he, his government (and Russians generally) are respected by the international community, thus silencing any domestic critics.

There is one more chess move Vladimir Putin may be contemplating to score a massive propaganda win from his World Cup, with both foreign and domestic audiences. Don't be surprised if Putin manages to have President Donald Trump drop by as an honored guest at the World Cup final in July 15. The White House is [already talking about](#) a mid-July meeting, and surely it must be tempting for Trump to be able to thank FIFA in person for awarding "him" the 2026 World Cup.

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