

FIFA World Cup Host decisions: Past, Present and Future

Authors: James Corbett

E-mail: james.corbett@me.com

In awarding the 2018 and 2022 World Cups to Russia and Qatar, FIFA confirmed the long-held suspicion that host status of the greatest show on earth was no longer recognition for excellence and experience in staging a sporting event. Instead, it had come to assume something else: a largely undefined role as agent for wider socio-economic-cultural change within a host nation.

The 2018/2022 host decisions followed the pattern set by award of the 2010 finals to South Africa as well as a succession of development tournaments to territories as diverse as Nigeria, the UAE and Trinidad. FIFA's boldness in awarding South Africa the World Cup has since been replicated by UEFA (Poland-Ukraine 2012) and, more particularly, the IOC (Sochi 2014, Rio de Janeiro 2016 over Chicago), which may even follow football's governing body in handing Qatar hosting rights to its premium event, the 2020 Olympics.

By choosing Russia as 2018 host, FIFA overlooked the bids of established European football powers - England, Holland-Belgium and Spain-Portugal - that could deliver 'safe' tournaments that would utilize existing infrastructure, excellence in security, transport, transit, and reward vibrant and safe fan cultures. FIFA's own inspectors highlighted as 'high risk' Russia's air transport infrastructure and its inadequacy in dealing with the long distances between host cities. The endemic racism, hooliganism and match-fixing that blight the country's domestic game were frequent targets for its bid rivals. Many of these criticisms have since been born out, with repeated instances of racism involving high-profile players, such as Roberto Carlos and Christopher Samba, while the country's leading ice hockey team, Yaroslavl Lokomotiv, was wiped out in a terrible air accident in September 2011.

Russia touted a different concept to their rivals in bidding for the tournament, seeking virtue in their status as a new World Cup territory and offering an ambitious domestic

legacy focused on building new stadiums and extensive football and civil infrastructure. Its bid chief executive, Alexey Sorokin, was always open about the challenges facing Russian football. He said that Russia needed the World Cup in order to transform itself. "Right now we have come to the point where we are impeded by our own infrastructure and it needs to be modernized," he told me in December 2009. "We think that if we have good stadiums, more people will come and there will be a better climate for matches. Our football will benefit better stadiums for sure."

But if Russia's election to host status was perplexing, FIFA's decision to overlook football's next superpower, the United States, in favour of Qatar was stunning. A tiny desert emirate with little discernable football heritage and sweltering summer temperatures its victory was greeted with a chorus of horror and shock. Brian Glanville described it as a 'wretched little anonymity of a football country' and the Australian broadcaster and FIFA ethics committee member Les Murray added that it was 'ludicrous'. 'FIFA is in big trouble,' he warned. 'Nobody will believe that Qatar won this process legitimately.'

In the period that has passed since Qatar's win, many troubling questions have been asked about the nature of its victory. But the answers that are most conspicuous by their absence are those of the 14 FIFA Exco members and why they voted for Qatar ahead of the US, Australia, Japan and Korea.

This paper traces the evolution of the World Cup bid process from the 1966 FIFA Congress in London – which simultaneously made host announcements for the 1974, 1978, 1982 and 1986 finals – to its most recent, dual process. It questions what the World Cup has come to mean as an event and the point at which the football element became a secondary consideration for FIFA. It assesses the lack of guidance from the FIFA administration about what should be demanded from a host nation, and the lack of transparency from those who are supposed to make that decision.

Crucially, as FIFA returns to a broader electorate for future host decisions, it asks whether, in a competitive bidding environment, the World Cup will ever again be a reward for excellence, rather than merely a catalyst to achieve it.