



**David MacFadyen**

## Valentin's cards

*Refereeing the dirtiest match in World Cup history*

Holland v. Portugal during the World Cup 2006 was the dirtiest match in tournament history, with sixteen yellow cards and four reds. Russian referee Valentin Ivanov's "Soviet school of refereeing" clashed with players' increasing defensiveness. But in Russia, Ivanov's refereeing was cause for celebration; so what does this say about the nation's attitude to rules?

The most unrelenting advertisement on Russian TV last summer was used to promote the beer "Old Miller" (*Staryi mel'nik*) during the 2006 World Cup, the planet's largest sporting competition — for which Russia did not qualify. Its text, designed to evoke a profitable form of nationhood, ran as follows: "Old Miller Beer: Official Sponsor for the Land of Mendeleev, Lomonosov, Kutuzov, Suvorov, Pushkin, Tolstoi, Dostoevskii, Chaikovskii, Glinka, Stanislavskii... and Shaliapin, too. Sponsor of their Football Team." The efficacy of corporate desire here depends upon recalling now-canonized triumphs over once-proscribed statutes, be they athletic or aesthetic. The Russian consumer re-enjoys both a sense of awe at high sporting, artistic or scientific standards and the shared (ie vicarious) triumph over them. Now, however, when those standards are not met according to the rules of someone else's competition (when a sub-standard Russian team does not qualify), the joy of erstwhile empirical triumph, of brilliant risk, is suddenly swapped for grim insistences upon prior, a priori values, so often disrespected by the insolent, atomizing pragmatism of today's outsiders. Yesterday's qualitative principles are ushered in when the quantitative ones fall short.<sup>1</sup>

These failed dalliances with some verifiable, jingoistic residue lie at the core of Russian, state-run television, too. Their anxious, restless repetition has led to parallels between primetime news, for example, and the fantastic rhetorical insistence of prior decades: "Putin with the people, Putin with animals, Putin with children..."<sup>2</sup> In May 2005 a protest against this type of persistently broadcast narrative led to a meeting outside the Ostankino TV centre, home to Channel One. Protestors wore bandanas around their mouths, decorated with a simple statement of audience disapproval: "Turn It Off!"<sup>3</sup>

Hence the reason why Putin is often equated with Stirlitz, the famous Gestapo agent of Brezhnevian TV;<sup>4</sup> the dour appearance and wan complexion — the conflation of tedious, repetitiously "proper" rhetoric on television with an extension or creation, even, of essential values. After all, as Putin once said about Russian domestic television: "You could show a horse's ass on TV for three months straight and even that would become popular."<sup>5</sup> Yet how well suited is this rhetorical technique of 1970s media for today's environment, especially when Putin himself as the referee of capitalist development, as the

supposed instigator of fiscal empiricism, is sounding increasingly anachronistic or underdeveloped? The 1970s, so fondly evoked today, offer us a warning. Even back then attempts at dogmatically insistent filmmaking were outstripped by an interplay of fickle fashion and audience desire. Viacheslav Tikhonov, the Soviet actor famous himself for playing both Stirlitz in 1973 and Prince Bolkonskii in the earlier, Oscar-winning *War and Peace*, once asked a young girl which part of *War and Peace* she liked best. She replied: "The scene where Natasha dances with Stirlitz."<sup>6</sup>

Self-replicating designations, no matter what Putin thinks about horses' bottoms, do not constitute stability or group identity. They flounder with particular speed among the workings of commerce that accelerate the failings of repetition *per se*, its returns to habit, to the workings of memory or the very representations of death through which, as Deleuze put it, "we make sport of our own mortality." Russia's experience of the World Cup offers an insight into this sporting struggle between a spoken presence, an absence, and the irksome subversions of capital, since "sports and their associated industries often represent socioeconomic phenomena of the first magnitude."<sup>7</sup>

The 2006 World Cup will be best remembered for French captain Zinedine Zidane's head-butt on Italian defender Marco Materazzi, after he apparently wished Zidane's mother the swift death worthy of an Algerian terrorist. Materazzi later said the only terrorist he knew was his badly behaved daughter; the French decided that Zidane deserved the nation's presidency, and a nationally broadcast beauty show in Russia choreographed the violence into its dance routines for 19-year old girls.<sup>8</sup>

Among the Russians who agreed with Zidane's dismissal was a 45-year old school teacher, also from the capital, Valentin Ivanov. "By definition," he said, "there could be no other decision... It was absolutely the correct decision to take."<sup>9</sup> What makes this particular opinion interesting is that Ivanov's parents are both Olympic athletes; his mother a gymnast and his father the leading goal-scorer at the 1962 World Cup. Even more important is the fact that Ivanov Jr., our opinionated TV viewer, was a referee himself at the Germany 2006 World Cup — Russia's only representative. The biggest country in the world proffered no players, only a grumpy pedagogue.<sup>10</sup>

On 25 June 2006, 41 000 people gathered to watch the match between Portugal and Holland. It turned out to be the dirtiest in tournament history; sixteen players were booked and four dismissed from the field of play; four minutes into injury time, Ivanov was still sending players off.<sup>11</sup> In the words of one journalist, "There was more action in the referee's notebook than there was on the pitch."<sup>12</sup> In many ways, the game summarized key elements of the tournament: the evident struggle between excessive old-school adjudication and the equally unwarranted, almost operatic simulation of injuries by star players to underscore their opponents' wrongdoing.<sup>13</sup>

Ivanov's attempt to institute law, order, and rules (ironically in Nuremburg), involved so many pieces of yellow or red paper that one Russian fan suggested they be marketed as "Valentin's cards". His tactics did not please FIFA. As a consequence, he was not retained for the quarter finals. FIFA president Sepp Blatter said that rules were "not being followed consistently from one match to another"<sup>14</sup> and expressed the wish that Ivanov himself had been given a yellow card for unfairness.

Key here is Ivanov's insistent officiating — a perversely repetitious inclination that patriotic Russian bloggers hoped would make him "more famous than Putin!"<sup>15</sup> Ivanov calmly replied that he represents a "Soviet school of refereeing". The physical and tactical preparation thereof has, he believes, "exceeded" the standards expected by UEFA.<sup>16</sup> Rules can be "done more"; if so, the results appear to be counter-productive.

A viciously crude article soon appeared, of all places, in the women's magazine *Damochka*, claiming that Ivanov had been an unwitting victim of the magic genie Khottabych, whom he once saved from drowning as a young Soviet Pioneer. Ivanov, claimed the article, was secretly peeved at his increasing age and lessening importance. To save Ivanov from any sad recourse to Botox, Khottabych appeared from nowhere in the stadium; he would realize Ivanov's whispered dream — that he become the centre of attention and "grab someone else's fame".<sup>17</sup> The genie imposed the same old rules, red card after red card, irrespective of context, until they were utterly counterproductive.

Asked to consider the outcome of his inflexible tenets, Ivanov, stating that he prefers to "work without the press", slowly began to reconsider his Soviet school of rule-keeping. After insisting that rules remain so "in Milan or anywhere else", he then admitted to regional styles of play that require a regional finessing in their management, too. His unwilling acquiescence to difference (to the success of others) then led to grim musings on the loss of a better, local *past*. To the suggestion that Russia might even employ, for example, "Bulgarian or Uruguayan referees to improve the upper Russian divisions," Ivanov said there were two downsides to foreigners applying any rules to Russian players. The quality of domestic refereeing would decline; the new, immigrant officials would be too "unfettered" in their decision-making. They'd be off to the airport the next day — unworried by the public or journalistic assessment of their work.<sup>18</sup>

Ivanov has joked about going into politics;<sup>19</sup> Moscow seems keen. Vitalii Mutko, President of the Russian Football Association, said publicly that Sepp Blatter's critique was politically motivated and that the Portuguese squad deserved to "be taught" a thing or two. It was Portugal, by the way, together with Slovakia, who had denied Russia a place in Germany... Mutko is part of Putin's enclave in Moscow, having served on Anatoly Sobchak's<sup>20</sup> staff, worked as the president of FC Zenit St Petersburg and then replaced Viacheslav Koloskov as the Association's president. Koloskov, incidentally, had been personally appointed by Brezhnev;<sup>21</sup> Mutko is continuing that tradition in his support for Ivanov, as were the readers of *Izvestiia* after a national poll to understand Ivanov's behaviour. The most popular answers were that "the Portuguese deserved it" and that Ivanov merely wanted to guarantee that "Russia would be remembered for ages."<sup>22</sup>

Overseas, there appeared websites both in favour of and against Ivanov's continued existence on earth.<sup>23</sup> The negative site, not surprisingly of Dutch origin, was swiftly closed; its motto was, quite simply, "Stop the Russian Ref." This was a far cry from the glory days, once again under Brezhnev, when the Soviets reached the semi-finals in 1966. Ivanov's mother agreed and beat her wounded heart on NTV. "My son speaks wonderful English, he's got a PhD in pedagogy. But his father dragged him into football. With that my life came to an end."<sup>24</sup> Blatter would subsequently apologize, but Ivanov Jr was still left floundering in a sea of competing opinions.<sup>25</sup>

The arbiter of rectitude, of the better or older standards of an absent nation, was overwhelmed by the inverse effects of an over-zealous, ritualistic imposition of rules independent of context or reception. This outcome, potentially applicable to other sociopolitical contexts, can be best explained within the framework of game theory. The first thing we need to consider is the nature of players' "wilfulness" as defined by the game; what, in other words, are the productive and yet possibly transgressive desires that Ivanov is supposed to be keeping in check by blowing his whistle every ten seconds?

In the Los Angeles World Cup of 1994, FIFA decided that victories were to be rewarded with three points, not two. The old system of one point for a draw and zero for a loss stayed in place. This was designed to increase the likelihood of passionate competition and, therefore, higher-scoring matches.<sup>26</sup> In fact the opposite happened. Officiated, increased incentives in contexts of multidimensional exertion failed twice over. Once a goal was scored, teams would revert to immediately more defensive strategies, substituting strikers in order to do so. This emphasis upon the defence of initial gains in turn increased dirtier play, precisely the type of behaviour encountered by Ivanov. The Portuguese scored after 23 minutes and then sat on their lead; the Dutch held 62 per cent of possession for the game, but their opponents were happier to physically grind them down, rather than regain possession and attempt a second goal. In the terminology of game theory, the players re-optimized their aims (the "spirit of the law") in ways than ran contrary to plans of the governing body, to the law *per se*.<sup>27</sup> Management becomes difficult when output cannot be measured directly or runs contrary to expectations.

From work with *La Liga* in Spain, it has been shown that home crowd attendance drops greatly at fixtures involving a visiting team that is perceived (beforehand) to be dirtier, in other words, more driven by the instituted desires. The primary aim of the Football Association — fiscal success for one and all — suffers as a result of regulated drives upon which it insists. The FA's financial incentives are, ironically, grabbed again (or re-contextualized) by the players, who want victory more than they want to help the game as a whole or its financial wellbeing. Hence the confusion among Russian players such as Spartak captain Egor Titov, who praised Ivanov's "professionalism", whilst bemoaning the state of Russian refereeing *per se* as "disgusting".<sup>28</sup> Italy's *Gazzetta dello Sport* examined each one of Ivanov's decisions and declared them all justified.<sup>29</sup> The institution of these rules will get repeatedly tougher as the players continue to re-optimize: touchline officials were, for the first time, increased to five in Germany, and the current ban on video-replays also looks set for repeal. The occasional frantic twists and turns made by Ivanov, contrary to all physical logic, led some media analysts to suggest that he is already getting some kind of secret video information.<sup>30</sup> Things are getting out of hand — so much so that the Russian press has declared Ivanov is the unlucky "victim of a standard stereotype", the very idea that one person can possibly uphold the law among 22 strangers.<sup>31</sup> And yet Ivanov wants to hold onto the reins, the grim standard-bearer of yesterday's Soviet standards amid today's footballers who — in the words of his "supportive" site — "fake injuries, complain and brawl behind the referee's back."<sup>32</sup>

Some Western observers have explicitly blamed FIFA and Blatter for instituting a series of laws they could never manage, since the players' behaviour, *taught* by officially promulgated decree, had long since been re-optimized in other directions. The so-called "disciplinary meltdown" of the Portugal-Holland game was foreseeable.<sup>33</sup> Some have even suggested that once FIFA saw the awful outcome of their marriage between capital and

officialiating, they "threw Ivanov under the bus".<sup>34</sup> Ivanov could see it coming, as he admitted to the press, but in the face of Russia's failure today as players, as agents of inspired risk-taking spontaneity, he "does a Karenina" in the name of older, better rules.

Ivanov would no doubt concur with Camus, apparently a reasonable goalkeeper himself, that "All that I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football."<sup>35</sup> The obligations become so obsessive, however, that in their grim insistence upon the rules of an absent system, their very failure is required for a moral triumph.<sup>36</sup> Stately, socialist desire redux is, it would seem, fiscally re-optimized as perverse rule-bending and then caught in a vicious spiral of diminishing legal returns. Ivanov and his grander counterpart would do well to heed the more knowing, wittier words of Sartre on the one group activity or imagined community that attracted one third of Russians to TV sets last June: "In football everything is complicated by the presence of the other team."<sup>37</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> The air of *failure* surrounding their uncertain designation is better hidden visually than verbally; a simultaneous Fuji advertisement hid an *almost* Russian tricolor amid Cyrillic characters and a crowded plenitude that fleeting readers had little time to query. Fuji, after all, began advocating their corporate kinship *after* Russia had been knocked out by Slovakia, yet it looked like a Russian grouping. The linguistically-driven *Staryi mel'nik* ad has less faith in its ability to outline a proper, better assemblage of Russian All Stars metonymically one after the other. It quickly lapses into self-deprecation.
- <sup>2</sup> "Kakim uvidelo Putina televidenie na minuvshei nedele?" *Radio Svoboda*, 14 November 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> "Oppozitsii nadoel serial 'Putin,'" *Agentstvo politicheskikh novostei*, 23 May 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> Zassoursky, I. *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia*, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe 2004, 123–3.
- <sup>5</sup> "Industrial'nye itogi i sodержatel'nye tendentsii," *Radio Svoboda*, 5 July 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> "Èkranizatsii, èkranizatsii..." *Retranslator*, 25 November 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> Palacios-Huerta, I, "Structural changes during a century of the world's most popular sport, *Statistical Methods & Applications* 2004 13: 241–258.
- <sup>8</sup> "Krasavitsy Rossii stali futbolistami," *News Info*, 25 July 2006.
- <sup>9</sup> "Ivanov schitaet, chto udalenie Zidana absolutno pravil'noe," *Utro.ru* 14 July 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> "Who Are These Guys?" *Hamilton Spectator*, 29 June 2006.
- <sup>11</sup> A detailed list of all post-match statistics can be found at "Rossiane ustanavlivauiut absolutnyi record ChM 2006," *KID: Iugo-vostochnaia liga*, 26 June 2006.
- <sup>12</sup> "Portugal 1—0 Holland," *BBC News*, 25 June 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> The context between these two tendencies is neatly summarized in "Let it Flow," *Herald Tribune*, 23 June 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> "Poll, Ivanov Miss Out on World Cup Referee Assignments," *USA Today*, 28 June 2006.
- <sup>15</sup> "Blatter Criticizes Referee Ivanov," *BBC News*, 26 June 2006.
- <sup>16</sup> "O tol'ko chto uvidennom," <http://valerkka.livejournal.com>, 26 June 2006.
- <sup>17</sup> "Bez nazvaniia," *Damochka*, 23 June 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> "Uzhe znaia, chto skazal prezident FIFA..."
- <sup>19</sup> "Otveti: Valentin Ivanov, futbol'nyi arbitr," *Afisha*, 24 July — 6 August 2006, 144.
- <sup>20</sup> Anatoly Sobchak, the first democratically elected mayor of St Petersburg, co-author of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, and mentor of Vladimir Putin.
- <sup>21</sup> "Putin Pal Is New Football Czar," *Russian Intelligence*, 4 August 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> "Arbitr Valentin Ivanov: Ia sudil tak, kak videl," *Izvestiia*, 27 June 2006.
- <sup>23</sup> These were [www.valentinivanov.com](http://www.valentinivanov.com) negative and [www.ivanovvalentin.com](http://www.ivanovvalentin.com) positive. The middle ground, occupied by expressions of sympathy and understanding, is well represented by sites such as "Bednyi sud'ia" at <http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/1018812/>
- <sup>24</sup> "Sud'ia Ivanov razdal eshche ne vse kartochki," *NTV Novosti: Sport*, 2 July 2006.
- <sup>25</sup> "Blatter Regrets Criticism of Referee Ivanov," *Reuters.UK*, 4 July 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> "FIFA officials' goal: Encourage attacking, high-scoring matches," *USA Today*, 17 March, 1994, and "FIFA Approves scoring changes," *LA Times*, 17 December, 1993.

- 27 "Sabotage in Tournaments: Making the Beautiful Game a Bit Less Beautiful," Garicano, L. and Palacios-Huerta, I.: <http://www.econ.brown.edu/fac/ipalacios/research.html>
- 28 "Titov: Segodnia nas opiat' obokralli sud'i," *Championat.ru*, 22 July 2006.
- 29 "How Soccer Devours Its Referees," *New York Sun*, 28 June 2006.
- 30 "Is Technology Already Part of the Action?" *IC Liverpool*, 29 June 2006.
- 31 "Arbitr Valentin Ivanov: Ia sudil tak, kak videl." *Rol.ru*, 31 July 2006.
- 32 "Support Referee Valentin Ivanov!" Homepage comments at: [www.ivanovvalentin.com](http://www.ivanovvalentin.com)
- 33 "It's Not the Referees That Should Be Sent Home," *SquareFootball.net*, 30 June 2006.
- 34 "Stand By Your Referee," *M&C Sport*, 30 June 2006.
- 35 "The Meaning of Football," *Spiked*, 1 June 2006.
- 36 Zizek speaks to the role of failed drive as triumph in *The Parallax View*, Cambridge: MIT 2006, 63–4.
- 37 "Soccer and the Meaning of Life," *New York Times*, 24 June 2006.

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