

# The Winner is...Qatar! Really?

## The controversial FIFA World Cup 2022

by Jochen Ressel



2021, I already thought that in November 2022 it will be time for another ABS Blog article with content related to the same issue – at the time when the FIFA World Cup in Qatar is due to commence. But why? What is so special after so many FIFA World Cups organised in so many parts of the world through the decades of professional football? The answer is simple: Because the world turns, and if an institution is not turning with it, it is smashed aside by centrifugal forces. And it seems that FIFA is urgently required to make such turns in the light of the event in Qatar, which is due to start in a few days.

### The world's biggest sport event

Talking about the FIFA World Cup, we must understand that it's the world's biggest sports event. It is bigger than the Olympic Summer Games (rank 2), the Tour de France (rank 3), the UEFA Champions League (rank 4) and the NFL Super Bowl (rank 5). It is followed by more fans than any other sports event on the globe – live in stadiums, in thousands of public viewing areas worldwide, via TV broadcasts and online streaming. It is reported that the FIFA World Cup 2018 was watched by more than half the world's population, setting a new record – 3.57 billion people.

It is obvious that with an event generating such an extensive reach, huge money is involved: For the countries hosting the event by welcoming millions of fans and the impact on the tourist industry for the years ahead, for the TV stations if they can secure the broadcasting rights, for the sponsoring companies with regard to their brand awareness as well as of sold products like jerseys, shoes, fan scarfs and much more, but also for the infrastructure industry – more about this to follow later. And additionally, it is evident that transparency is an issue as an incredible amount of money is involved.

### **“The winner is...Qatar!”**

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the FIFA Executive Committee announced not only one location for a specific World Cup tournament but for the coming two in 2018 and 2022. The former FIFA President suggested to do so, Sepp Blatter – a man who was already associated with FIFA for decades.

His predecessor, João Havelange, FIFA President from 1974 to 1991, formed FIFA as we know it today through the professionalisation of the World Cup events. He made Blatter become Secretary-General as the operational head of the association, hence co-responsible for the transformation of FIFA into a vast organisation. Havelange claimed that FIFA owned contracts and properties representing USD 4 billion when he resigned.

But it wasn't a smooth takeover by Blatter from Havelange. If we follow the reports, it was almost a plot, as Havelange was accused of bribery and corruption, which was the reason for him to resign not only as FIFA President but also as a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2011, and as UEFA Honorary President in 2013. During the investigations related to the insolvency of the sports agency ISL, evidence was given that between 1989 and 1999, bribe money in the amount of SFR 138 million in total (more than EUR 141 million) was received by Havelange and numerous other football officials. It seems unlikely that Blatter would not have been aware of all this as being Havelange's closest associate for so many years.

However, Blatter became the new FIFA President in 1991. One of the decisive moments in winning the election was his promise to bring the FIFA World Cup to Africa, which secured him the votes of the African Confederation (CAF). He delivered his promise in his second term with the tournament in South Africa 2010, a decision taken in 2004, after the end of the Apartheid regime.

In 2010 it was time to decide on the hosting country for the FIFA World Cup 2018, and, as already mentioned, the 24 members of the FIFA Executive Committee decided to combine it with the nomination for 2022, officially "to give the countries more time to prepare its infrastructure", as the German magazine "Stern" reported in his December 2008 issue.

The announcement of the 2018 hosting country was already received as a surprise. Observers of the application process were left behind with question marks, especially as the Olympic Committee had already decided in 2007 that Russia is hosting the Olympic Winter Games 2014 as well (in the Sochi region), and some asked what led FIFA to this unexpected decision. As Belgium/Netherlands, Portugal/Spain, England, and Russia were the contenders, where one of the world's most famous figures of football, David Beckham, promoted England extensively, it was unexpected that the winner was Russia.

But the question marks should become even more significant a few minutes later when Sepp Blatter opened the envelope to announce the country hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022. As the contenders were Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the favoured USA, it was unbelievable when the delegates listened to Blatter's words, "And the winner is... Qatar!"

### **Qatar: Really a winner?**

The minute the tiny Emirate in the Middle East was announced, the rumours began that this must have been bought with huge money. To understand why the assumption was raised so quickly, we need to understand the decision-making procedure within FIFA. The decision is made by the 24 officials forming the FIFA Executive Committee, who are delegates from the so-called "Confederations", representing the Football Associations of the various geographic areas. For Europe, the UEFA – for the South American rim, the CONMEBOL – for North- and Middle America, the CONCACAF – for Asia, the AFC – for Africa, the CAF – and for the Oceanic rim, the OFC. When Qatar was announced to host the FIFA World Cup 2022, it was apparent that even a number of CONCACAF members voted against their own contender, the USA, and there must be a perfect reason for them to do so. Therefore, corruption and bribery accusations were raised immediately.

Blatter, who openly and publicly expressed favour for the USA application, said after the Qatar announcement that it is FIFA's primary obligation to develop football on a global level and, therefore, to bring the World Cup to the Middle East for the first time. But there is no relevant football at all in this region. It's not part of the Arabic/Islamic culture, there are no relevant teams or players nor fans, the leagues are insignificant, and there are no stadiums and sports venues available – not to mention the average temperature of 45° C and more in the summer, which makes it ridiculous to expect playing a World Cup at this time of the year. After long discussions it was decided to postpone the event to December, as all leagues worldwide had to adopt their plans to squeeze a December FIFA World Cup in their schedules.

Qatar promised to build 8 big stadiums with the most modern infrastructure possible and full air-conditioning. Hence, one important point became clear: As in Sochi, where infrastructure worth EUR 8 billion was built before the Olympic Games, and also in Qatar, we talk about colossal business for project developers to create the required venues.

But who should actually build those? As in Dubai and other Emirates, thousands of workers from the Asian rim, mainly from its poorest countries, are carried to the Middle East to do the construction work. Having no rights, no insurance, abysmal wages in the light of the incredible wealth of the Emirate, no health care, sub-standard accommodation, and a questionable human rights situation manifested in numerous fatalities of workers reported from the international press, with the additional frightening reports on the women rights' status, the protests and an awful image of Qatar became the main topic in the media. From my point of view, it was far too silent during the last years and only by now, as the tournament is to begin, the media is addressing these issues more clearly – and reactions followed in due course. Here are just two examples which popped up during the last weeks:



Football with RTL

If good atmosphere is not automatically happening, you pay for it, as the "Sportschau" reported...

Headline: "Qatar pays fans to create good atmosphere"



Sportschau

In a letter to the World Cup participants, FIFA demanded that they should concentrate on football from now on. The DFB's response was not long in coming: "We will continue to support impulses for positive, progressive change and will continue to advocate and engage for a convincing result with regard to the two decisive and open issues that we have been discussing with FIFA for a long time."

Also, a change in value perception became apparent on the sponsoring side. Was it in the past that a sponsor of the FIFA World Cup was received by the public positively, this is now turning, and companies supporting the Qatar event are appearing in the lousy light of being supporters of an inhuman regime. The campaign "Proud Anti-sponsor of the World Cup" is the first ever where companies express their pride in having nothing to do with the FIFA World Cup.



And what harms sponsors particularly is the fact to be brought in a direct context of bribery and corruption. In October 2010, two reporters from the "Sunday Times" posed as lobbyists for American companies and offered large sums of money to two members of the FIFA Executive Committee if they would give the USA their vote as the venue for 2022. Both officials accepted these offers. Hence, evidence was presented that corruption is common practice in FIFA.

The big investigation was initialised by the so-called "Garcia-Report" issued in September 2014, in which Michael J. Garcia, FIFA Chief Investigator, reported discrepancies regarding the procedures of awarding Russia and Qatar to host the FIFA World Cup. This internal report made the FIFA reporting a self-complaint of offence to the authorities and they acted immediately. Not only the Swiss authorities, but also from the US stepped in. It started with Blatter being accused, but other names quickly came up: Mohamed bin Hammam, former Head of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and (surprisingly...) a Qatar citizen, Jack Warner, former President of the CFU and Vice President of the CONCACAF, and others. Finally, all 24 members of the FIFA Executive Committee were investigated, and several were imprisoned. All this makes clear: Neither Qatar nor FIFA are the winners of this questionable decision to give the World Cup to this small part of the world.

### Learnings for the future

As for the IOC organising the Olympic Games, it is also necessary for FIFA to accept that a new age has commenced, an era of transparency and ethical and environmental responsibility. Practices, as they are also revealed in the Netflix series "FIFA Uncovered" <sup>2</sup> and which were common practice through decades, are concepts which do not find support in the public any longer. As sponsors depend on selling their products to the public and are confronted with complex compliance policies in their businesses, a positive image of being a sponsor of the World Cup is inevitable, as it is for contenders. Should FIFA continue to make questionable decisions, no reputable country will apply for hosting the World Cup in the future, nor will companies accept sponsorships.

Sport is a political affair and always has been. Even the "invention" of sport was a political affair when the Greek soldier ran from Marathon to Athens to declare victory. The Ancient Olympic Games were political contests of Greek city states such as Athens, Thebes, Sparta, Troya, and others fighting against each other. "Panem et circenses" was the concept of major sporting events in the Roman Empire to satisfy and keep citizens quiet. And this close relationship between sport and politics has endured through the ages into modern times. Just think of Hitler's Olympic Games in 1936, the politically motivated doping strategy of the GDR athletes in times of the Cold War to demonstrate strength and power, the politically motivated terrorist attack during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, the Olympic boycotts of various nations from East and West in the 1980s, up to the politically motivated appointments for hosting of Olympic Games and World Championships.

A term has even been created for such decisions: sports washing (like the well-known "green washing"), meaning that a country hosts major sporting events to cover up political, ethical and social deficits. The question is whether it is worth keeping this concept or whether a clear separation of sport and politics is better for the whole sport with all its actors.

Personally, I think it is more than appropriate that the major sport institutions no longer allow themselves to be misused as instruments for political causes. On the other hand, what country should host one of the major sporting events that does not have a political message attached to it? It is easy to say that the separation of sport and politics is a necessity but putting it into reality is much more difficult than we may think.

Finally, it is also about us as fans and media consumers. For over a decade, between 2010 and today, we all had the chance to express our opposition, denial of such practices, and protest that we might not consider Qatar to be an adequate choice. But we didn't. Nor did the media clear enough. This is not a call for revolution, but we need to understand that public opinion is key and a highly influential factor also for institutions like FIFA. We are all part of the question in which direction the world is turning. And we can't deny and refuse this responsibility to defend values which should matter more to us than they ever did in the past – the values of freedom, liberty, human dignity, justice, sustainability, ethics, and fairness.

**The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!**

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### References

- 1) ABS-Blog "Relevance in question: The Olympic Games" by Jochen Ressel, published August 2021. <https://www.oeborg.at/relevance-in-question-the-olympic-games/>
- 2) Netflix series "FIFA Uncovered": <https://www.netflix.com/at/title/80221113>



### *About the author*

**Jochen Ressel** is the Secretary-General of the Austro-British Society. He worked several years for a UK company and its HQ in London. He held management positions in various companies and institutions, e.g. as the Executive Director of the Senate of Economy, where he regularly commented on current political and economic developments. Currently, he holds the position as COO of SoccerCoin, a FinTech company active in the field of sports.

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