Mega-Events in New Democracies: Public Perception of Benefits Associated with the 2013 EuroBasket for Men

Simon Ličen, Washington State University
Renata Slabe-Erker, Institute for Economic Research, Ljubljana, Slovenia
Amy Cole, Washington State University

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Nations that host large sport events often justify the endeavor by citing potential economic benefits such as increases in tourism and employment opportunities. Though positive economic impacts are inconsistent, many large events still receive public support (Maennig & Porsche, 2008; Allmers & Maennig, 2009). Researchers increasingly tout the intangible emotional benefits of large sport events as some of the most important and potentially lasting outcomes (Kavetsos & Szymanski, 2010). The feel-good effect that results from a “sense of communal well-being” (Cornelissen & Maennig, 2010, p. 97) represents one of these intangible elements. By emphasizing the positive social and/or emotional effects of hosting a large sport event, the feel-good effect provides a useful framework for understanding the continued willingness to spend public funds on such events. Mega-events such as the Olympic Games and soccer World Cups are limited in terms of potential hosts; however, when other major (but not quite “mega”) events such as world and continental championships are considered, the pool of potential host countries expands considerably. These events still impact societies and economies, but their perceptions and legacies often fly under the research radar. This study focuses on one such event by analyzing the Slovenian public’s perception of hosting the 2013 European Basketball Championship for Men.

Four main research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How does public opinion regarding hosting major international sports events change after hosting such an event?

RQ2: Which aspects of hosting a major sports event are perceived as most beneficial?

RQ3: Which aspects of hosting a major sports event are perceived as most negative?

RQ4*: How do perceived benefits from staging a major sports event change over time?

To study public perceptions related to this event and their shift over time, a survey was conducted among the visitors of the website of the Slovenian public service broadcaster, RTV Slovenia, at three points in time—four weeks before, immediately after, and eight weeks after the event. The questionnaire consisted of nine scaled items measuring the opinions of the general population regarding major sports events in general (5-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree); a multiple-selection question listing perceived benefits and risks associated with hosting specifically the 2013 EuroBasket in Slovenia (a maximum of three selections from a list of 10 items); a multiple-selection question listing perceived negative aspects associated with the event (a maximum of three selections from a list of 11 items); and a scaled item measuring the overall level of expectation/perception of the value of the event for Slovenia as a country (6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = no benefit at all to 6 = very high benefit). Participants’ demographic characteristics (age, gender, level of education and level of income) and information regarding their following of the event were also collected. The first survey gathered 707 useful responses (79.9% men; mean age = 30.22 ± 9.65), while the second survey generated 742 valid responses (69.4% men; mean age = 30.73 ± 9.85). Although the samples are not representative of the Slovenian population, the two groups did not differ in terms of level of education ($\chi^2(4)=0.292$) and level of income ($\chi^2(7)=4.080$). The third survey will be conducted in November (two months after the end of the event) and its results will be presented at the conference.

The first research question—how public opinion regarding major sporting events in general changes after staging one—is answered by comparing the level of agreement with nine statements one month before and immediately after the event. Overall support to hosting major international sports events grew significantly after hosting the 2013 EuroBasket for men in all nine items. Participants expressed increased agreement that staging a major sporting event “allows them to experience sport more emotionally” (before = 3.92 ± 1.08, after = 4.17 ± 0.99; $p < 0.01$); “enhances
world-wide recognition of a country” (before = 4.37 ± 0.90, after = 4.56 ± 0.70; p < 0.01); and “enhances national awareness of the country’s population” (before = 3.77 ± 1.04, after = 4.28 ± 0.88; p < 0.01). They were also more likely to agree that “the sporting culture of a nation should also be nourished by staging international sports events” (before = 4.24 ± 0.88, after = 4.35 ± 0.82; p < 0.05) and that “Slovenia should take advantage of opportunities to stage such events to increase employment and living standard” (before = 3.78 ± 1.11, after = 3.90 ± 1.02; p < 0.05). In turn, agreement significantly fell with the following reverse-coded items: “the hosting of these events is only a burden for the host nation” (before = 2.38 ± 1.14, after = 2.10 ± 1.04; p < 0.01); “it is not right to invest in these events because this devotes taxpayers’ money to bring profit to only some” (before = 2.28 ± 1.17, after = 1.93 ± 1.01; p < 0.01); “it is not right that I have to contribute to the organization of sports events I do not attend or follow” (before = 2.16 ± 1.09, after = 1.94 ± 1.03; p < 0.01); and “the value of sports for the people does not depend by these competitions” (before = 2.64 ± 1.15, after = 2.45 ± 1.13; p < 0.01).

The level of perceived overall benefit from staging the event grew from an average 4.69 (on a six-point scale; ± 1.10) before the event to an average 4.98 (± 0.95) immediately after the event (p < 0.01). When selecting up to three specific advantages from a list of perceived benefits, however, only two items were selected more often after the finals than they were before tip-off: the “world-wide recognition of Slovenia” (selected by 74.8% of participants before and by 80.1% after the event; p < 0.01) and “the promotion of an active lifestyle among the youth and in general” (32% to 39.6%; p < 0.01). Post festum, six other perceived benefits were less likely to be selected, but only “more opportunities to watch games live for people living in Slovenia” (37.5% to 33.1%) significantly so (p < 0.05).

Differences for “profits for Slovenian businesses (in construction, retail, tourism, hospitality, the media, transportation, etc.)” (38.2% to 36.6%); “increased state income through VAT due to the consumption of foreign visitors, fans, media, etc.” (29.2% to 28%); “the promotion of the ‘I Feel Slovenia’ national brand” (18.6% to 16.4%); “the gained experience in organizing and marketing major sports events” (21.2% to 21.7%); and “the infrastructural heritage of the event” (26.2% to 25.2%) were not significant.

The most negatively perceived aspects of the event were “price or inaccessibility of tickets to watch the games” (selected by 49.2% of respondents immediately after the event) and the related “unclear competition schedule and confusion with ticket purchases” (23.4%); and the perceived “insufficient number of spectators at games when the Slovenian team did not play” (43.2%) and “insufficient number of foreign fans” (21.5%). Other items were rarely selected, and 32.1% of participants stated that they “did see notice negative aspects; the event was organized virtually flawlessly.”

In the short run, the general public in Slovenia seems to agree that organizing the 2013 EuroBasket in Slovenia was beneficial for the country and its population. A third survey, conducted two months after the end of the event, will answer the question whether perceived benefits and deficiencies endure over time (*). The perceived benefits are complex, and concepts such as national awareness and international recognition difficult to quantify. Regardless, the event certainly contributed to enhancing the overall national mood. Further research will show whether staging this sports event has indeed brought the community lasting benefits, or whether the main contribution will remain the “feel-good effect” on the local population.