More than a Game
Sport, Legitimacy & Unrecognised States
Imagine you are the leader of an unrecognised state. You have fought a war of independence, have control of your territory and provide government services to your people. But the rest of the world don’t want to know about it. They would rather pretend that your state doesn’t exist.

What do you do? How do you improve your nation’s standing – in the eyes of both the international community and your own people?

Well, you could host a football tournament.

I have recently returned from two weeks in Abkhazia, an unrecognised state in the Caucasus bordering Russia and Georgia, where I attended the World Football Cup. It’s like the World Cup, only for teams which are not in FIFA – from Kurdistan to Northern Cyprus, from the Chagos Islands to Somaliland.

I undertook qualitative research – interviewing political elites and civil society leaders – to find out why Abkhazia was hosting a football tournament. Major sporting events are not cheap. Abkhazia has a weak economy, is fiscally dependent on Russia and is still rebuilding from its secessionist conflict – why commit resources to sport?

My answer is legitimacy, both external and internal. Abkhazia hosted the tournament as a form of international image-building, with the presence of 100 foreign journalists ensuring coverage in news publications on every continent. As the President admitted to me, “The [tournament was] a window for the outside world to hear about Abkhazia.” Sport also helps consolidate national identity, and the tournament unified an otherwise divided multi-ethnic society. One young Abkhazian explained: “The team did what no political force in our country could, it brought everyone together.”

Now it might be tempting to dismiss my research as a frivolous justification for two weeks of football watching. But, understanding how unrecognised states operate is important – these are anomalous territorial entities that exist outside our ordinary conception of the modern state system, and are often the source of regional instability. Understanding the dynamics behind the unexpected persistence of Abkhazia and co is a significant step towards resolving these so-called frozen conflicts. While researchers have looked at conventional legitimation strategies, symbolic legitimacy such as through sport has not previously been considered.

By grounding my research in fieldwork, I also respond to a recent critique of unrecognised state studies as overly reliant on secondary sources. Finally, the Euros and Olympics this year only underline the political implications of sport.

The football gods ultimately smiled on Abkhazia, with the home team coming from behind to win on penalties. The crowd went wild, the President declared a public holiday and the celebrations were streamed around the world. Sport, it seems, is far more than just a game.