

For global health, stop the summer of superspreader mega-events

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This summer's schedule of international sporting mega-events threatens worldwide efforts to stem the spread of COVID-19. Despite decreasing case numbers, [improved vaccination rates in wealthy countries](#), and [plans to donate or sell at-cost vaccines to needy nations](#), upcoming mega-events risk prolonging the pandemic. In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak led to the cancellation of a variety of mega-events worldwide, including the UEFA European Football Championship and the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo. The return of these mega-events now – while symbolically significant – is dangerous and premature.

Mega-events differ from [mass gatherings like the Hajj or Kumbh Mela](#) primarily due to their mobility and political power. Since mega-events move around the globe, each new host city and nation faces novel challenges for event organization, infrastructure construction, and planning for security and health emergencies. They also offer the political power of an unparalleled broadcast reach and are commonly used for [soft-power projects](#). Mega-events combine the [health risks of mass gatherings](#) with the [social, economic, and environmental risks of mega-projects](#), all on a global stage. Given current concerns over the coronavirus Delta variant – and particularly regarding spread among young people – it is irresponsible to use this political platform to project a message of life returning to normal, and doubly so when the mega-events could become superspreaders themselves.

There are too many events back on the docket now, but because of their size and reach, the UEFA European Football Championship and the Summer Olympics are both emblematic and uniquely dangerous. For the first time in its history, the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship (or Euros) was organized as a pan-European tournament, with 24 teams playing in eleven different cities from London to Baku. After rescheduling the games for summer 2021, UEFA instituted a set of health-oriented operational protocols in order to manage their mega-event during the pandemic. Despite substantial tracking and mitigation efforts at organizational and national scales, players from Spain, Sweden, and Scotland missed the opening of the rescheduled tournament due to positive tests.

Fan travel is also likely to be problematic, and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control cautioned that travel for the Euros could trigger increased community transmission of COVID-19, particularly in the context of the more transmissible variants.³ Event organizers shared alarming statistics for stadium capacity goals: London and Munich aim to fill at least 20% of their stadiums (approximately 21,000 and 14,000 spectators, respectively); Amsterdam, Bucharest, Copenhagen, Glasgow, Rome, and Seville will cap at 25-45% capacity; Baku and St. Petersburg plan for 50%; and Budapest has committed to filling 100% of its 67,000 seat stadium.⁴ On top of this, city organizers in each of the eleven host cities have opened so-called UEFA Festivals, a set of free-entrance fan zones featuring cultural events, live music, and food offerings, available to residents and travelers alike and running for the duration of the festival. These zones are high capacity with the potential for extended close contact, but there is no mention of them in the UEFA protocols which are, instead, targeted at players and stadiums.

The upcoming Summer Olympics in Tokyo also present significant challenges for global sport and for global health. Aside from exposing fans, athletes, and residents to continuing radiation from the Fukushima meltdown, the largest risk related to the Olympics is Japan's poor containment of COVID-19 combined with a slow vaccine rollout – a situation that led experts, politicians, and protestors in the general population to call for cancellation of the Games outright.⁵ For its part, the International Olympic Committee and the Tokyo organizing committee seem determined to push ahead, ignoring the reported 80% of the Japanese population said to oppose the Games.

Given these organizational challenges, the varieties of public opposition, and the potential for becoming superspreader mega-events,⁶ why are these mega-events restarting? IOC president Thomas Bach argued that the world needs a public display of global post-corona unity, and there is undeniable symbolic power in the mega-event spectacle. There are also financial concerns: UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin stated that postponement carries less of a financial impact than cancellation, and the billions of dollars at stake can muster significant political leverage.

Conversely, given the dangers of the Delta variant and the contagion risks engendered by extensive travel and prolonged mixing at stadiums and fan zones, both the Euros and the Olympics risk becoming superspreader mega-events, and official complacency toward these dangers may ultimately re-ignite the pandemic.⁷ It is too late to stop the Euros now, but the international community of health policymakers and experts still have time to advocate for the cancellation of the Olympics. The time for sport and celebration will come again, but that time should not be now.

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