

The Sochi Olympics and Russian National Identity

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A great deal has already been written on the importance that Russian President Vladimir Putin attached to successfully staging the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The consensus among domestic and foreign analysts is that Putin saw the Olympics as an opportunity to demonstrate Russia's importance in both international and domestic contexts. This memo focuses on the domestic effects of the Olympic Games.

Putin's main goal in holding the Olympics was to use the patriotic fervor that generally comes with hosting such an event to shore up popular support for his regime. To this end, the Russian government has repeatedly portrayed its success in attracting mega-sporting events such as the Universiade held in Kazan in 2013 and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, as well as the Olympics themselves, as an indicator of international recognition that Russia has restored its position as a major international power. This image in turn has been used as part of an effort to unify the Russian population around the theme of Russian greatness. By examining Russian press and media coverage of the Olympics, this memo discusses how the Olympics were perceived in Russia during and immediately after the event.¹

Starting from Behind

Prior to the start of the Games, both Russian and Western analysts and media reports focused on the high cost of the Olympics and potential problems stemming from shoddy construction and security threats. Russians were particularly upset about the high cost of Olympic facilities and infrastructure, with frequent mention that the total cost was higher than any previous Summer Olympics (a much larger event) and all previous Winter Olympics combined. A second theme involved concerns about shoddy

¹ Data for this report were compiled by doing a search for the terms "Sochi" and "Olympics" in all Russian central newspapers for the dates February 13, 2014 to February 27, 2014. Newspapers with relevant reports included both government controlled (*Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, *Izvestiia*, etc) and independent (*Vedomosti*, *Kommersant*, etc.) sources.

construction. This concern was highlighted in the media by a series of viral videos showing domestically manufactured Olympic torches going out repeatedly, coupled with jokes about the government not being able to send the manufacturers to Siberia because they are already based there.

Security was considered a potentially more serious problem for the Olympics. Numerous media stories highlighted Sochi's proximity to the more unstable parts of the North Caucasus and the potential for terrorist acts at or near the Games. The use of large numbers of non-ethnic Russian migrant workers also contributed to concerns about security threats among the more xenophobic segments of the Russian media.

A Great Success

Once the Olympics were underway, all these concerns were largely forgotten. This turn of events largely parallels the history of similar events in other countries, where domestic criticism of the planning and expense of carrying out mega-events prior to their occurrence is most often forgotten as long as the events themselves are perceived as being carried off successfully. Events such as the 2012 London Olympics and the 2008 Beijing Olympics were criticized for excessive spending and problems with security (the former) and violations of human rights, lack of press freedom, and pollution problems (the latter). However, once the events were underway, reaction in the host countries was almost entirely positive. While public opinion in China is difficult to measure in a reliable way, surveys conducted in Great Britain in 2013 showed that over two-thirds of respondents believed that the Olympics had been worth the cost and 74 percent would like to see the Olympics return to the country in the future.²

Russian perceptions of the Olympics seem to be headed in a similar direction. Russians were particularly relieved that there were no terrorist attacks or other major security incidents in Sochi or the surrounding area immediately prior to or during the Olympics. Furthermore, both Russian and foreign media sources reported being pleasantly surprised by how unobtrusive the security measures in Sochi proved to be. This perception was in sharp contrast to discussion prior to the Olympics, which focused on the extent to which necessary security measures might detract from the atmosphere at the Games and the unprecedented invasion of privacy represented by a visitor registration system implemented by the Russian organizers.

Russian media have also focused on the generally positive foreign reaction to the Olympics themselves, highlighting the contrast to the initial highly negative reaction to the state of hotel facilities immediately prior to the start of the Games. The Russian press cited reactions from prominent Western newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *Financial Times*, as well as from other media sources such as Germany's ARD television,

² <http://www.bbc.com/sport/0/olympics/23434844>

indicating that the government had succeeded in establishing a positive image of Russia through its hosting of the Olympic Games. Particularly interesting in this regard is the prominence attached to a quote from the *Boston Globe* that highlights Putin's role in this success: "In the end, nothing could tarnish Vladimir Putin's Olympic parade."³ The prominence given to Western reactions, both the negative ones before the start of the Games and the positive ones during and after the Olympics, highlight Russians' continued insecurity regarding their country's place in the world. In such an environment, foreign approbation is inevitably highlighted as confirmation that Russia retains a prominent role in the international community.

Finally, Russian media highlighted the success of Russian athletes, particularly the record number of medals earned by Russia at the Games. This success was compared to Russia's especially poor showing at the 2010 Vancouver Games, with media discussing how Russian sports authorities learned lessons from that failure. Explanations for the turnaround thus included not just home field advantage, but also the hiring of coaches from abroad. Although the early exit of the Russian men's hockey team initially led to a great deal of handwringing, the criticism was quickly drowned out by the successes of Russian athletes in other sports.

One very interesting aspect of the analysis focused on the number of foreign athletes who, for various reasons, had decided to compete for the Russian Federation. The most notable of these athletes included the short-track speed skater Victor Ahn and the snowboarder Vic Wild. Russian analysts highlighted the significance of the fact that successful foreign athletes were willing to compete for Russia. At the same time, they noted that the Russian medal count could have been even higher had the country been able to retain athletes who were born in Russia but for various reasons had chosen to compete for other countries, including biathletes Darya Domracheva competing for Belarus and Anastasiya Kuzmina competing for Slovakia, as well as snowboarder Iouri Podladtchikov competing for Switzerland.

Forging National Identity through Mass Spectacle

In any Olympic Games, the opening ceremonies present key moments for promoting a particular image of the host nation for both international and domestic consumption. While the Sochi opening ceremony was clearly intended primarily to promote a particular image of Russia to an international audience, it also had to pay attention to how the show would resonate domestically.⁴ In this context, the organizers chose to focus on Russia's contributions to world culture through literature, music, and dance. At the same time, Russian power on the world stage was shown repeatedly, but by selectively highlighting the most progressive actors and stabilizing events. These include

³ Aleksandr Polotskii and Gleb Kostarev, "Nichto ne smoglo brosit ten na olimpiiskii parad Putina," *RBK Daily*, February 24, 2014.

⁴ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/a-putinkin-opening-ceremony-in-sochi/494525.html>

the modernizing (but also state-strengthening) Peter the Great and the critical role played by Russia in defeating Napoleon and ensuring peace and stability in Europe for most of the 19th century.

Stability and growth were also emphasized in addressing most of Soviet history, where the chaos of the revolution and its immediate aftermath were clearly contrasted with the supposedly prosperous and orderly post-World War II period. The voiceover talked about the founding of a new world that has continued through the present day, thus connecting the post-Communist period with the most stable part of the Soviet epoch, including even the period of postwar rebuilding and economic growth—the time of late Stalinism, which resonates with many older Russians. Order was symbolized by the politically unthreatening Uncle Styopa, a universally beloved character from Russian children’s books. Growth and stability were also highlighted by the subsequent appearance of newlyweds and baby carriages. Difficult moments such as the Great Terror and the entire post-Soviet period were simply excluded.⁵

Finally, the entire program completely ignored Russia’s minority populations or even the notion that the Russian Federation is a multiethnic country. The entire performance was focused on the accomplishments of ethnic Russians. By comparison, the previous Winter Olympics, held in Vancouver, highlighted the cultures of the First Nations peoples of British Columbia and of Canada as a whole. The Circassian populations that dominated the region where the Sochi Games were being held until the mid-19th century were completely absent from the program. This narrative is likely to have been a conscious choice designed to appeal to more nationalist-minded Russian viewers while also avoiding difficult issues related to claims that the Russian conquest of the Caucasus included a genocide of the local Circassian population.

Impact on the Population

Initial domestic reactions seemed to indicate that Putin successfully achieved all of his goals connected with the games. Putin’s already fairly strong popularity rating went up by five percent during the Olympics. Russians reacted to Western journalists’ criticism of conditions in Sochi hotels by pointing out that many of the photos circulating on the internet were fake or taken at a different time in other locations. Western criticism served primarily to unify Russians, many of whom had been skeptical about the preparations and expense of the Olympics, essentially promoting national pride in response to what was seen as largely unjustified criticism.

The initial analysis of the Sochi Olympics’ domestic impact thus appears to justify the goals and expectations of the Russian government in deciding to host the games and to

⁵ World War II was excluded as well, but this was because of International Olympic Committee requirements.

expend a great deal of money and resources on making them as spectacular as possible. In the week immediately following the conclusion of the Olympics, it appeared that pride in the performance of Russian athletes and the country's ability to carry off a mega-sporting event on the world stage had unified the population, increased Putin's popularity, and therefore strengthened the regime's hold on power.

Even as analysts were just beginning to consider the extent to which this sense of national pride and unity would last beyond the immediate aftermath of the Games, the conflict in Ukraine fundamentally changed the focus of media attention and the calculations of Russia's political elite. Several years of carefully nurturing Russia's international image were eliminated by the military intervention in and annexation of Crimea. While this act may well have irrevocably changed how Russia is perceived in the United States, Europe, and other Western countries, it has so far only served to further unify the vast majority of the Russian population in support of Putin's policies. The perception that the government is acting to defend co-ethnics from Ukrainian "fascists and nationalists," as the Russian media has relentlessly contended, has done more to distract the population from dissatisfaction with corruption and stagnation at home than could possibly have been accomplished through Olympic success.

Although at the time of writing no survey results have yet been published on public perceptions of the intervention in Crimea, Russian media and social media commenters seem to see the Olympics and the Crimea intervention as two complementary sides of Russia's return to greatness. In this interpretation, the Olympics symbolize Russia's ability to compete on the world stage, while the intervention shows that Russia can act strongly and decisively to secure its geopolitical interests.