The 2014 Sochi Olympics and Russia’s Civil Society

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ABSTRACT This article examines the impact of mega-events on civil society. Based on a case study of the 2014 Sochi Olympics, it concludes that mega-events provide a way for state-business alliances to impose their development preferences on society with little oversight or accountability. Environmental groups, in particular, find few opportunities to influence decisions. Nevertheless, activism is not completely futile because, in some cases, groups can use events like the Olympics as a platform to score small victories and to develop experience that can be applied in subsequent confrontations. Additionally, mega-events expand the repertoire of Russian organizations by giving them a central focus around which they can organize, though to date, they have not taken advantage of these opportunities.

What is the relationship between civil society groups and the organizers of mega-events such as the Olympics? Activists in the field, and academics investigating them, have come to mutually contradictory conclusions. One side focuses on how civil society groups can use the massive investment made in the Olympics by others as a platform through which they can hijack the international media spotlight to promote progressive change that the event organizers did not plan (Price, 2008). The other side argues that mega-events work in just the opposite way – allowing states and corporations to limit the input of civil society while they take advantage of the scale and limited time frame afforded by Olympic planning to act with little public oversight or scrutiny (Lenskyj, 2008).

Efforts by civil society groups to exploit the Olympics to promote their own agendas take advantage of the fact that the Games stand at the nexus of a country’s domestic and foreign policy. Olympic hosts decide to bid for the Games, in part, because they are interested in boosting their international image (Burbank, Andranovich, & Heying, 2001), which makes them susceptible to pressure from the international community. The most celebrated example of an Olympic event encouraging democratization was the end of military rule in South Korea just before the 1988 Seoul Games. Political protests in the summer of 1987 called into question Korea’s ability to host the games the next year and the unprecedented international media attention on the country facilitated the declaration of military ruler President Chun Doo Hwan on 29 June 1987 to step down and call direct elections in December 1987 (Pound, 2008). With an eye to such global leverage, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Human Rights Watch, regularly seek to capture the media attention of the Olympics to affect change on a wide range of issues, including labor abuses, media repression, religious freedom, and civil liberties (Worden, 2008). The Games are also seen as a mechanism for promoting environmental awareness and developing a green lifestyle in the host countries and among those who attend or view the competition on television. Even if efforts to promote such causes are not immediately successful, the Olympics provide a rallying point around which civil society organizations can develop experience to use in future campaigns (Fors, 2009).

While the Olympics may provide civil society groups with a platform to promote their causes, they also hand the state and corporations tools for limiting society’s ability to exercise oversight and hold the officials account-
able. Researchers like Bent Flyvbjerg and his colleagues describe a world of “design by deception,” in which mega-projects are frequently approved even though their sponsors underestimate costs, overestimate benefits, overvalue local development effects, and undervalue environmental impacts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Once a city wins a bid for the Olympics, it has seven years to get ready. Since there is no flexibility in the schedule – the Opening Ceremony must take place at the appointed time – officials often shortcircuit ordinary accountability processes as they determine resource allocations in democratic countries (Lenskyj, 2008) and use the Olympic cloak to legitimize their actions in authoritarian countries, where there is little public accountability even under normal conditions. One recent study concluded: “There is, in other words, a well-established pattern here, spanning mega-events, continents, and regime types. The pattern is one where corporate profit and effective delivery are valued more highly in event hosting than the values of participatory democracy or social justice (Hayes & Karamichas, 2012, p. 21).”

This article will seek to sort out these contesting versions of the relationship between civil society and mega-events in authoritarian conditions by examining the role of Russian environmental organizations in the preparations for the 2014 Sochi Olympics. When does “platforming” work, allowing civil society groups to change the narrative of the Games that was designed by state and corporate Olympic organizers for other purposes? When do states and corporations prevail in using mega-events in ways that limit the role of civil society? Ultimately, this article concludes that mega-events create opportunities that civil society can exploit as well as new constraints on its activities.

The Olympic mega-event and state-society relations in Russia

Sports mega-events are typically defined in the academic literature as “large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events, which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance (Roche, 2000).” Such events have significant consequences for the host city, region, or country in which they occur and attract extensive media coverage (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006, p. 2). The Olympics and a handful of other events make it possible to reach a “global television” audience that is both large in size, numbering in the billions, and includes viewers willing to interrupt their daily routine for the event (Spa, Rivenburgh, & Larson, 1995, p. 209). Mega-projects are the massive infrastructure ventures, usually driven by public funding, associated with making such events possible.

Our definition of civil society distinguishes it from the state and corporations (Cohen & Arato, 1994). In particular, we focus on the organizations that serve as intermediaries between citizens, on one side, and state and corporations, on the other (Henry, 2010). This definition of civil society is particularly useful in authoritarian Russia, where the state frequently works closely with chosen corporations against broader public interests.

Typically Russia’s environmental groups did not have anywhere near the resources or organizational infrastructure of the Olympic backers, making their interaction asymmetrical. The Olympics add to the conventional repertoire of the protest movement in Russia and benefit civil society because the Games deliver a specific event around which organizations can mobilize. Moreover, the Olympics provide a set of ideals that the Russian author-
ities claim to support and the members of civil society can hold them to these ideals.

For Russia’s civil society, a central question is to decide whether to play by the regime’s rules and work inside the system or instead to devote their resources to pressuring the regime from outside, using street protests and other means (Kozlovsky, 2013). Participating within the system is difficult because the regime elites have stacked the rules in their favor, making it extremely difficult for the opposition to win a contested election or gain access to meaningful decision-making processes. Even established democracies have blocked access by environmental groups. In several Olympic cities, the organizers set up consultative bodies to work with civil society groups and incorporate their input. However, it is not clear whether these groups had any real power to make changes in the ways that the Games were organized or were just designed to neutralize unwanted public criticism. In fact, some activists charge that the authorities’ motivation behind establishing such groups is to prevent the opposition from having any impact on the management of the Games (Shaw, 2008, p. 11). Given the small chance of success, it is difficult to mobilize Russian citizens to participate in such “systemic” activities. Protests, on the other hand, can be dangerous for participants since they risk being beaten or arrested, making it difficult to turn out people in numbers that will make a difference in the political system. Given the choice between these poor alternatives, most Russian citizens decide not to participate at all (Howard, 2002).

In contrast to the relatively resource-deprived civil society organizations, the Russian state has an extensive tool kit that it can use in responding to citizen-led initiatives. These responses range from repression (arresting the key activists, forcing their emigration, or the use of violence against them), harassment (intrusive legal or regulatory investigations, hacker attacks on their websites), cooption (enducing groups to support regime preferences), ignoring, and even incorporating their input into the decision-making processes.

**The Environmental Movement in Sochi**

Environmental issues present a useful test of whether the Olympics serve as a platform for civil society groups to promote progressive causes or a mechanism for states and corporations to circumvent such input. The IOC had little interest in environmental issues before the 1990s, but the 1992 Albertville Games were an environmental disaster, prompting the Olympic movement to revise its policy and add the environment as the movement’s third pillar, along with sport and culture. There is some anticipation that having environmental standards could promote international norms diffusion and raise expectations among domestic constituencies of a cleaner environment (Hayes & Karamichas, 2012).

The environmental stakes for the Sochi Olympics are high because the infrastructure construction associated with the Winter Olympics has a greater impact on the natural setting than the construction associated with the Summer Games, even though the Summer Games usually have a higher profile and more participants. The Winter Games take place in mountainous areas that are more ecologically fragile than the urban locations where summer events are held and usually require the construction of a man-made setting that is more difficult to manage (Dansero, Corpo, Mela, & Ropolo, 2012). Likewise, the winter events concentrate large numbers of people in
small places, which can put severe stresses on the surroundings. Sochi’s ecological footprint is bigger than for most Games because its bid proposed an ambitious plan that would deliver all new sporting facilities and extensive infrastructure construction, including a new airport terminal, construction of railway and roads from coast to mountains, roads in the mountain area linking the sites, and significant upgrades to Sochi’s sewer and electricity systems. Competitors from Austria, which also sought to host the Games, argued that the use of existing structures in Salzberg would limit environmental impact if their site were chosen (International Olympic Commission, 2007, p. 69).

Practice has not lived up to the ideals espoused in the concept of a “Green Games.” At the Torino 2006 Games, organizers set up the Environmental Consultative Assembly with representatives of 13 environmental organizations and 10 local government institutions. The group was helpful in identifying problems with the Olympics and disseminating information. However, it had little actual impact on the organization of the Games beyond reducing the number of snow-making machines to limit their environmental toll (Dansero, et al., 2012). An analysis of the 2000 Sydney Games found that the bid laid out extensive environmental protections, but the New South Wales government legislation created loopholes and conflicts with the original guidelines, resulting in what watchdog Green Games Watch 2000 described as “selective compliance” to environmental requirements (Caratti & Ferraguto, 2012). Residents affected by Olympic construction could not file lawsuits against them and the project managers did not have to file the usual environmental impact assessments (Hayes & Karamichas, 2012). Another assessment found that in the cases of Sydney and Athens 2004, the events did not leave an ecological legacy (Karamichas, 2012). In neither place did the Olympics result in a culture change or the adoption of strategies to protect the environment. In preparation for the 2004 Athens Olympics, Greece altered its constitution in order to limit forest protection (article 24.1), ultimately circumscribing the power of environmental and citizen initiative groups (Hayes & Karamichas, 2012, p. 16). Similarly, the Beijing Games failed to stimulate a long-term solution to that city’s air pollution problems (Rich, 2012).

Sochi’s experience with the Games seems to be in line with previous Olympic experience regarding environmental protections: great promises are made up front, but there is little implementation afterwards (Müller, 2013). In its bid for the Games, the Sochi organizers claimed that “Sochi has developed an integrated and inclusive system for managing natural resources by working closely with public authorities and non-governmental organizations (Sochi 2014, 2007, p. 31).” However, the small but vocal environmental movement in Russia has criticized the deleterious impact the construction and associated activities will have on the natural surroundings of the city and the nearby ecology, including land allocation, water pollution, waste management, and other consequences of intensified human use. Even before the IOC accepted Sochi’s application to host the Games, a group of 47 environmental groups from across Russia asked the IOC to reject Sochi’s proposal (Kavkazskii uzel, 2007). The activists wrote that they had nothing against hosting the Games in Russia, but rejected the high environmental price of bringing the event to Sochi. They noted that seven venues were planned to be created in the Sochi National Park and the buffer zone to the UNESCO World Heritage Site Cauca-
sus State Biosphere Preserve. This problem, combined with the lack of positive environmental evaluations, the failure to take public opinion into account in making management decisions, and the violation of numerous Russian environmental laws in preparation for the Games formed the core of the complaints in an “anti-bid book” prepared by several environmental groups (Avtonomnoe Deistvie, Druzhina okhrany prirody MGU, Institute “Kollektivnoe deistvie”, & Maikopskoe otdelelenie VOOP, 2007).

Once the bid was accepted, Sochi’s green movement lodged a number of complaints about the Games and the construction associated with them. In evaluating the bid, the commission expressed hope for continued dialogue with environmental NGOs on litigation that they had pending against the government. However, such state-society dialogue seemed unlikely in practice because the bid committee assured the IOC that “any action by the Supreme Court would have no effect on construction schedules and development of Olympic venues (International Olympic Commission, 2007).”

As noted above, a central dilemma for environmental organizations is whether to work with the event organizers in the hopes that they can reduce the environmental impact or to confront it head on through protests. Observers of mega-event planning have argued that the process is primarily top-down and citizens’ participation typically consists of reacting to plans developed elsewhere (Hayes & Karamichas, 2012, p. 22). There was little citizen input in the U.S. games held in Los Angeles, Salt Lake City or Atlanta (Burbank, et al., 2001). In the case of Sochi, public opinion polling shows that participation and consultation in planning have been marginal and local support for the Games has shrunk from 86 percent in October 2006 to 57 percent by November 2010 (Müller, 2012). In spite of their promises to cooperate, the authorities ignored the main requests of the environmentalists. Already in 2008 the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology changed the zoning of the Sochi National Park to allow construction there (Shevchenko, 2013), a decision that was reinforced on July 14, 2009, when the Sochi City Council adopted a new general plan for the city’s development confirming this change (Perova, Karpova, & Aminov, 2009).

The big international environmental groups World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace originally worked with the authorities, but subsequently became disillusioned with the state’s failure to follow through on environmental measures discussed. On July 3, 2008, Igor Chestin, head of the World Wildlife Fund’s Russia chapter, and Ivan Blokhov, a representative of Greenpeace, met with Putin in Sochi and he agreed to move the bobsled run and alpine Olympic Village from their planned location on the Grushev Ridge. After this meeting, Putin seemed to think that the Games would now have the environmentalists’ stamp of approval and deputy Prime Minister Aleksandr Zhukov declared that the organizations had no more claims against the Sochi sites (Naumov, 2008).

However, what seemed like a good start quickly fell apart. By 2010 the relationship had turned adversarial because the WWF felt that decisions agreed to at meetings with the authorities simply were not enforced (World Wildlife Fund, 2010a). The group noted, in particular, that the construction of the combined road/railroad from Adler to Krasnaya Polyana, the largest infrastructure project of the Olympic effort worth more than $6 billion, began without a sufficient analysis of the environmental impact. At that time, the United
Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) warned that the organizers were not doing enough to compensate for the environmental damage that the construction was causing (United Nations Environmental Programme, 2010). Subsequent efforts by UNEP to set up a dialogue between the environmental NGOs and the authorities in October 2010 failed, according to WWF, Greenpeace, Ecological Watch on the Northern Caucasus (a group that had consistently opposed the authorities) and other social organizations, because “as with previous Missions, the bureaucrats either ignored the meetings, created obstacles for the participation of society, or sent people with no power to make decisions to the meetings (World Wildlife Fund, 2010b).” In one case, the bureaucrats started a meeting that had been planned for 2 pm at 11 am without warning the NGOs in advance, thereby making it impossible for them to participate. By January 2011 the NGOs refused to meet with UNEP because they felt that such meetings would not solve environmental problems “but could be used for the purpose of providing ‘green public relations’ for the Olympics (World Wildlife Fund, 2011).”

A major problem for the environmental organizations is that Russia has hollowed out the institutions that typically organize Olympic Games, turning them into facades, and shifting power to other organizations that have even less accountability to the public (Robertson, 2011, pp. 194-197). In its January 2011 mission report to Moscow and Sochi, the UNEP itself complained that its main partner, and the institution that is supposed to be implementing the environmental plans, the Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee, in fact has little control over the construction and development of the facilities and that real power lies with organizations like Olympstroy and Russian Railroads, state-controlled corporations with little public oversight (United Nations Environmental Programme, 2011).

Activists working on environmental issues surrounding the Russian Olympics risked their own personal safety. One of the most prominent activists fighting against environmental damage caused by the Olympics is Suren Gazaryan, who represents Ecological Watch on the Northern Caucasus. Along with his colleague Andrei Rudomakha, he was detained by the authorities for several hours when he tried to block the illegal logging of protected trees in the construction of the road/railroad linking Adler and Krasnaya Polyana in August 2009 (World Wildlife Fund, 2009). Gazaryan also spoke out against the use of timber from the Sochi National Park and warned about the dangers of the dumps being created near Sochi. At the end of 2012, Gazaryan fled Russia for Estonia fearing imminent arrest for his efforts to expose the construction of a billion dollar vacation home in Krasnodar Krai, allegedly for Putin, and protests against illegal logging around the governor’s dacha.

In a situation where the state authorities were both the key decision makers and unwilling to respond to ecological concerns, the environmental movement largely gave up its efforts to protest the games and the infrastructure construction around them. After 2009, WWF declared that “these Olympic games will never be ‘green,’ since they have already caused irreparable damage to unique ecosystems,” although they still held out hope in that “there is still a chance to minimize further negative consequences and carry out territorial compensatory measures (expanding and creating special nature preserves) (World

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Activities by other groups also petered out. The Institute for Collective Action lists no Sochi related protests in 2013 through August 15th though the Ecological Watch on the Northern Caucasus continues to post news of environmental damage caused by the Olympic construction at its website (http://ewnc.org) even though the Russian security services searched their office and e-mail on March 27, 2013, and warned them to register as a “foreign agent” (Human Rights Watch, 2013) under repressive anti-NGO legislation Russia adopted in 2012.

Despite these overall setbacks, civil society groups have won some victories. In one of the most prominent triumphs, the residents of Kudepsta protested against the construction of a gas-powered power plant from May 2012 to April 2013. In May 2013, when it was clear that construction would not be completed in time for the Olympics, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak announced that the project would be removed from the Olympic program and that all construction would be stopped (Human Rights Watch, 2013). He claimed that the electricity would not be needed after all. Protesters were also able to block the construction of a second port that would only create surplus shipping capacity that could not be utilized (Shevchenko, 2013). Similarly protests blocked the Evraziiskii company and its French partner Degremont from constructing a 4 billion ruble factory to burn sludge. The firms claimed the factory as part of the Olympic program and hoped to get state support. However, societal groups opposed the plant and what seemed like a sure thing in 2010 was cancelled in 2011, when the Russian government declared that burning such waste was not ecological (Shevchenko, 2013). While all these cases represent victories for the environmental groups, it is also possible that the organizers decided to curtail the projects for a variety on non-ecology related business reasons because it no longer made sense to proceed with the projects.

**Conclusion**

The experience of environmental groups in the preparations for the Sochi Olympics confirms the expectation that an alliance of state and corporation interests can use a mega-event to propel their pro-development interests while minimizing the extent of public input. Although Russia’s overall political climate is hostile to NGO input in public-policy making, the Olympic time frame and expectations of a global audience provide an excuse for the authorities to further curtail the role of civil society. In this sense, the Olympics did not live up to the expectations of those who saw the Games as a platform to promote a variety of progressive causes.

However, while the environmental groups had little overall impact on the preparations for the Games, they were able to limit the extent of the environmental impact by blocking the construction of some facilities that had been included in the Olympic plans. In these limited cases, citizen action had consequences. Such experience helps Russian groups to develop skills and knowledge that will accumulate over time. The key question in defining future state-society relations, though, will be whether the regime learns to better deploy its repressive arsenal just as quickly as the civil society groups learn to focus their protests.
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