

Sochi and the 2014 Olympics: Game over?

We are going to build a new world-class resort for the new Russia – and the whole world!” Thus was the promise of Vladimir Putin when he made the pitch for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in front of the International Olympic Committee in Guatemala in 2007. His speech, delivered in English and French, did not fail to impress, nor did the oil- and gas-fuelled record growth rates in excess of 8% that Russia logged in 2006 and 2007. The IOC members awarded Russia the much-coveted prize of becoming an Olympic host city, snubbing contenders Salzburg and Pyeongchang. Not mincing words, the Russian newspaper *Vedomosti* put what it perceived as the dominant attitude succinctly: “The world got convinced that there is a lot of money in Russia – that it becomes more and more – and that this man [Putin] controls it, whatever company it may formally belong to” (*Vedomosti* 2007). The order was a tall one: Sochi did not have a single sports venue that was fit to host an Olympic competition. Thus, it proposed to build all 14 major venues from scratch, plus a list of more than 200 objects to be constructed as ancillary infrastructure. The Olympics were meant to become a game changer on Russia’s road to big push modernisation.

Fast-forward six years and six months to the present day. Sochi is covered in dust as workers toil in three shifts 24/7 on what is one of the largest construction sites in the world in the final three months of the run-up to the opening ceremony on 07 February 2014. From an initial estimate of USD 12 billion, costs have skyrocketed fourfold to USD 50 billion. And this is unlikely to be the final tally. As far as chasing records goes, this is probably the saddest one: the most expensive Olympics ever, Summer or Winter – even though the size and infrastructure requirements for the Winter Games are by numbers of magnitude smaller

when compared to the Summer Games. A recent initiative, spearheaded by Boris Nemcov, unveiled some grotesque cost-overruns: the ski jumps, for example, came in at almost seven times the initial cost projection (Nemcov and Martynjuk 2013). What is more, numerous lucrative contracts were awarded to cronies of ruling elites, driving up costs even further and signalling the self-serving character of the event. Reflecting the essential ungovernability of the event, the chief of the state company responsible for delivering the construction for the Winter Games, *Olimpstroj*, was replaced three times in four years. 1.5 million hits in six months for the video clip “How much did they steal at the Olympics in Sochi?” (*Сколько украли на Олимпиаде в Сочи?* 2013) indicate to what degree the mismanagement of the Olympic Games has become a public issue.

Yet, the greatest costs of this gargantuan project are not monetary. Originally conceived as an event for the people, the Sochi Olympics have become anything but. Promises of modernization and improvements of quality of life ring hollow with the local population, who feels that the profits go elsewhere (Müller 2012). Resettlements have additionally soured relations between the local people and the administration (Karbainov 2013). Construction activities have blighted the protected areas in which construction was rubberstamped with the help of a special decree. Commitments to host the greenest Games ever, enshrined in the bid book and communicated to the public as a mantra, have been flouted on a regular basis (see Orttung and Zhemukhov, this issue; Müller 2014).

This is the backdrop against which the four contribution of this special issue are set. Bo Petersson and Karina Vamling (both at Malmö), who have also edited a book on the

subject (Pettersson and Vamling 2013) open the suite of papers with an examination of how the Sochi Games are utilised in Russia's quest for great power status and how they are designed to shore up legitimacy for Putin's role as a Russian leader. Emil Persson (also Malmö) considers the image component of the Sochi Games and the tensions behind the projection of a harmonious, multi-ethnic nation. This is of particular relevance given the outright refusal to recognise or address historical wrongs done to the Circassian nation during and after the Caucasus wars in the area of Sochi (Richmond 2013). The prospects for civil society are at the heart of Bob Orttung and Sufian Zhemukhov's (both Washington D.C.) contribution. The preparation for the Winter Games has provided ample opportunities for people to voice dissent – all too often, however, to little avail. But Orttung and Zhemukhov conclude on a hopeful note, highlighting that activism has been able to stall at least some projects. In the final article, Sven Daniel Wolfe (St. Petersburg) takes us down to earth with his meticulous investigation of the divergent development of two villages that are caught in the middle of the Olympic development frenzy in Sochi – yet fall by the wayside at the same time. The contributions demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of the Olympic Games in Sochi, but also drive home the point that what was envisioned as a game changer is close to turning into the opposite: game over.

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About the Editor

Martin Müller is a geographer and Research Professor of the Swiss National Science Foundation at the University of Zurich. He is interested in the planning and impacts of mega-events and has done extensive work on the 2014 Winter Games in Russia (e.g. Müller 2011, 2012, 2013). He is also editing a special issue on Sochi 2014 for *East European Politics*, to appear in 2014. In a new comparative project, he looks at knowledge circulation and impacts of the Olympic Games and the Football World Cup in Russia and Brazil.

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