

# Display Window or Tripwire? The Sochi Winter Games, the Russian Great Power Ideal and the Legitimacy of Vladimir Putin

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**Abstract** *President Vladimir Putin's claim and policies to resurrect Russia as a great power have been a cornerstone for the construction of the hegemonic position of power that he has for so long successfully exerted and upheld. This paper discusses the Russian great power ambitions in relation to national identity and popular appeal, and puts them in relation to the upcoming Winter Games in Sochi in 2014. The paper examines how this mega-event is discursively constructed as a manifestation of Russia's return to great power status, and as such is meant to convey certain messages internally as well as externally. The successful carrying out of the Games would no doubt constitute an important component in the undergirding of the – otherwise dwindling – legitimacy of President Putin. The event would be an important display window for manifesting the prowess of the Russian great power, and the location of the Games in Sochi by the Caucasian Mountains in the Russian South would have a deeply symbolical aspect. If the Games can be successfully carried out in a region that has for so long been experienced as volatile and unruly, then it must surely mean that internal order has been restored in the Russian great power. However, it is argued in the article that there are several potential tripwires on the way towards achieving these symbolically important goals. Problems of security, terrorism, geopolitical volatility, large-scale corruption and interethnic tension loom large, and may all turn out to be formidable obstacles and render the hosting of the Games a counter-productive enterprise.*

## BRINGING THE OLYMPIC GAMES TO SOCHI: OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

Political high profile involvement and campaigning have become increasingly commonplace when determining the location of prestigious international sports events (Markovits & Rensmann 2010). The successful Russian campaign for bringing the Olympic Winter Games in 2014 to Sochi was certainly no exception. Indeed, the Sochi Games have been characterized as President Vladimir Putin's "pet idea" (Müller 2011, 2095) and the pulling through of the project would probably have been inconceivable without him. Putin headed the Russian delegation to the Guatemala City IOC meeting in 2007 where the decision was made to let the Russian Federation and Sochi arrange the Olympic Winter Games. His address to the IOC – delivered in English and French – is believed to have played a crucial role in the process, not least his demonstration of highest-level political commitment to

the project. Putin's speech included a powerful state financing guarantee of 12 billion US dollars (YouTube 2007). This made, already at this stage, the Sochi Games the most expensive Winter Olympics ever in the history of the Olympic movement (Müller 2011, 2095). For his part, Vladimir Putin has also on numerous earlier occasions shown himself to be keenly interested in personally promoting mega-events organized in and by Russia. When Russia was hosting the Eurovision Song Contest in 2009 he made e.g. a point of appearing personally on site to see to it that the preparations were in order (Avellan 2010).

On a more general level, the Sochi Winter Games are, just like other mega-events to be hosted by Russia such as the FIFA World Cup in football in 2018, prone to provide a stage for the delivery of the message that Russia has once again resumed its role of great power in the contemporary world. With his domestic legitimacy dwindling, as it was suggested during the long series of urban protests in connec-

tion with the parliamentary elections of 2011 and the presidential polls of 2012 (Sakwa 2012; Shevtsova 2012), the Sochi Winter Games may prove to be a welcome opportunity for Putin to display strength and resolve and demonstrate that his is still a much needed strong hand at the helm. As it has been suggested in the scholarly debate, Putin may otherwise run the risk of being compared to his Soviet-time successors during the Brezhnev period of stagnation in the 1970s and early 1980s rather than being associated with strength and dynamic power (Petersson 2012; Goscilo 2013, 182).

It might well be that the Sochi Games will provide Putin with the stage that he has been looking for to deliver his message. However, it will be argued in this article that the endeavor amounts to a high-risk gamble, and that several contextual factors may collude to render the enterprise of shoring up Putin's legitimacy through the Olympics counter-productive. In turn, we will consider the areas of economy and corruption, interethnic relations, and security to illustrate that several tripwires may get in the way for the realization of the President's ambitions.

#### ECONOMY AND CORRUPTION

Apart from the state guarantees mentioned above, the financial platform of the Games has been bolstered by private initiative. From early on there was a keen interest among Russia's wealthiest business circles to make private investments in the Sochi region. The billionaire Vladimir Potanin, head of the Interros holding company, promised that his company would invest \$1.5 billion into different projects in the region (Ivanov 2007). Oleg Deripaska, the owner of the Russian investment fund Basic Element and a personal

friend of Putin's, bought 100% of the state-owned Sochi International Airport in 2006 (RIA Novosti 2006). Roman Abramovich, another well-known Russian financial tycoon, has also helped to fund the bid for the Sochi Olympics. However, while the backing by these actors goes a long way towards providing financial guarantees, it also sets the stage for allegations about shadowy commercial interests which relegate sports to the back seat, and about murky business deals, covert handshakes and corruption. Nonetheless, from the estimates of critical analysts it would seem as all sources of revenue will be sorely needed.

Thus, with half a year remaining to the opening of the Winter Games many observers note the extremely high costs involved in the construction works. According to Vladimir Dmitriev, head of the Vneshekonombank, the costs of some Olympic objects will exceed initial calculations by two or three times, and, added to this, almost half of the objects will be unprofitable (Titov 2013). Along with the huge rise in overall costs, it has frequently not been possible to finish construction works according to schedule. Vladimir Putin has certainly tried to project an image of a true mover and shaker, coaxing and cajoling the contractors at Sochi to deliver according to plan. At an inspection trip in 2012 he warned:

*After the journalists leave, I will tell you what failures to meet the deadlines will amount to. I do not want to frighten anyone, but I will speak with you as people I have known for many years now (Putin 2012a).*

The fight against financial irresponsibility or even embezzlement and fraud seems, however, to be one that not even Putin is likely to win. For instance, the RusSki Gorki Olympic ski jump complex was far behind schedule

at President Putin's inspection of the Olympic sites in February 2013, i.e. one year before the opening of the Games. This led to the dismissal of the vice president of Russia's Olympic Committee (R-sport 2013b). In early 2013 and to secure the preparations for the Games, Putin set up a special state commission under Deputy Prime Minister Dmitrii Kozak to deliver the Games according to plan (RIA Novosti 2013).

In the report "Winter Olympics in the Subtropics" the oppositional politician Boris Nemtsov and his co-author Leonid Martynyuk (2013) compare the Sochi Olympics with previous Games and discuss possible reasons for the striking differences in total costs. President Putin's initial estimation in 2007 was as mentioned a record USD 12 billion but the total bill will according to the authors probably be around 50 billion, i.e. more than four times higher. It is of course common that initial cost estimates do not hold, but as Nemtsov and Martynyuk argue, the cost increases in the case of the Sochi Olympics are exceptional and dramatic. Likewise, the costs of Olympic stadiums or other objects are approximately 2.5 times higher in Sochi than for comparable constructions at previous Games. Nemtsov and Martynyuk conclude:

*[T]he price tag of the Sochi Olympics without theft would be USD 50 billion divided by 2.5. The cost of the Sochi Olympics without theft would thus amount to USD 20 billion. This means that USD 30 billion were stolen. ...Thus, the overall scale of theft was around USD 25-30 billion, or 50-60% of the declared final cost of the Olympics. This corresponds to the normal share of kickbacks in Russia.*

It is not only economic malfeasance that makes the costs run sky-high, however. The climate conditions make the construction works

complicated, especially at high altitudes. Due to these severe conditions, the alpine Olympic village built by Gazprom was not expected to be ready until October 2013 (RIA Novosti 2012). Also, the mountain river of Mzymta has breached its banks and a protection dam resulting in heavy flooding close to the Olympic sites (R-sport 2013a).

#### INTERETHNIC TRIPWIRES

In contemporary Russia interethnic tensions are a growing problem, as discussed in a recent article by President Putin (2012b):

*The reality of today is growth in interethnic and interfaith tension. Nationalism and religious intolerance are becoming the ideological base for the most radical groups and trends.*

Xenophobic sentiments, mostly in relation to persons from the Caucasus and Central Asia, are markedly strong in Russia, not least in Moscow. A poll conducted by Romir in May 2013 shows that 70% of the respondents in the capital supported slogans such as "Russia for Russians" and 73% "Enough feeding the Caucasus" (Verkhovskii 2013). While the first of these slogans is self-explanatory, the argument of the latter is that federal subsidies be withheld from North Caucasus which should thus be left to its own devices.

It has been of vital importance for President Putin to retain the initiative in dealing with ethnic issues. Against this background he has established the Presidential Council of Interethnic Relations (President of Russia 2012). Putin is personally chairing the council, where one of the goals has been to work out a national strategy for the solving of interethnic conflicts (Obrazkova 2013). But what do interethnic relations look like on the ground, in the

region where the Sochi Olympics will be organized?

Russia's gradual conquest of the Caucasus and advancement to gain control over the strategic Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea coast has had a long history. It started in the 18th century and was completed in the mid-1860s when the indigenous population of Circassians was finally defeated. Following the Russian victory, most Circassians were forced to emigrate to the Ottoman Empire and the Circassian lands were populated by Cossacks and other groups from Russia.

Krasnaya Polyana, where the last Russo-Circassian battle took place in 1864 and where the Russians celebrated their final victory over the Circassians, will in 2014 be the site of the Olympic ski slopes. It has been decided to build an ethnographical cultural centre in Krasnaya Polyana, in connection with the Mountain Olympic Cluster. However, the centre will not be devoted to the history and background of the fateful events of 1864, as could otherwise have been expected. It will instead be called "My Russia" and include ethnographic exhibition halls, offer traditional food and souvenirs from all over Russia (Kavkazskii uzel 2013b). The organizers of the Games thus plan to put the ethnic and cultural diversity of Russia on display for the visitors in a cavalcade of colorful, exotic elements – centering around traditional symbols of Russian culture. Moreover, representatives from all over Russia participate in different activities, some of which have started well ahead of the Games in events like "Russia.Sochi.Park" in London (2012) and the "Cultural Olympiad", spanning from 2010 to 2014 (Sochi.ru 2013). The approach is therefore not to give any special attention to indigenous groups from the region. On the contrary, the Circassians have been almost absent from the events with few exceptions such as a one-

month exhibition in Sochi of Circassian culture (Kavkazskii uzel 2013a) and the performance of the ensemble of Kabardinka at Russia.Park in London (Russia-Park News 2012).

The Shapsugs, a Circassian group that traditionally have lived close to Sochi and still reside in scattered villages in the Greater Sochi district, now fight for their right to be recognized as an indigenous people of the region (Kapaeva 2012). The Shapsugs have approached the Governor of the Krasnodar Krai, Aleksandr Tkachev, with demands for recognition, but so far to no avail (Dzutsev 2013b).

Notably, the year of 2014 marks the 150th anniversary of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, adding as it were insult to injury. The way the Circassians see it, the Olympic objects are literally constructed on the graves of their fallen ancestors. These facts have had a mobilizing effect on the Circassian diaspora, which has organized protests against the carrying out of the Olympics on their sacred lands. Paradoxically, the staging of the Sochi Winter Games, an event that the Circassian organizations in the diaspora claim that they wish to stop, may amount to their fifteen minutes of fame; the Circassians will own the limelight as seldom before and as they will certainly not do again for a long time to come. This is the chance that they will get to make the world listen; once the Games are over they will risk returning to the status of an internationally little-known minority that they have basically had until just a few years ago (Funch Hansen 2013). This is in itself an angle worth looking into in future research: what will happen after the visit of the circus to town?

Under all circumstances, the Games have had a mobilizing and unifying effect on the Circassians in Russia as well as the Circassian diaspora in Turkey and the US. As Tiago Ferreira Lopes (2013) underlines:

*Circassian activists need to decide if the Sochi Winter Olympics 2014 are the end game, or just the commencement of a new game. Circassians have earned a lot of social capital that should not be disbanded solely because the goals towards the Sochi Winter Olympics might not be achieved.*

Presumably, the development in countries in Russia's vicinity that harbor a large Circassian diaspora will have an impact on the situation in Russia's North Caucasus. The question of allowing a repatriation of Circassians to the Caucasus has been an issue during the whole post-Soviet period but it has recently received special attention as a consequence of the flow of refugees from Syria. The so far largely negative Russian stance on the issue has been a further source of Circassian disappointment and frustration (Polandov 2013).

#### SECURITY CHALLENGES

Sochi is situated by the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of the three independent South Caucasian states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, territorial disputes and ethnopolitical conflicts, including several separatist ones, have been prolific. The most violent and well-known conflicts to date are the two protracted and violent Chechen wars 1994–1996 and 1999–2009, as well as the short but eventful Russo-Georgian war of 2008.

As a consequence of the Chechen wars, instability has increased on a general scale in the area and spread to other republics of the predominantly Muslim and ethnically diverse North Caucasus. Bombings, armed attacks and other forms of violence, not only against the authorities, have become a part of everyday life. The risk of terrorist attacks against the

Sochi Olympics has been highlighted by many observers. Devastating bomb attacks of recent years in sites such as the Domodedovo Airport and the Moscow Metro have been attributed to the Chechen connection, as has been the terrorist bombing of the Boston Marathon in 2013. If such attacks can be carried out in sites as remote from the Caucasus as Moscow and indeed Boston there is reason to fear their appearance also in and around adjacent Sochi.

In the summer of 2013 Doku Umarov, the self-proclaimed Emir of the so-called Caucasus Emirate and the leader of the Islamist resistance in North Caucasus, made a video proclamation targeting the Sochi Olympics. In this video he urges his followers to do their utmost to disrupt the Games:

*They plan to hold the Olympics on the bones of our ancestors, on the bones of many, many dead Muslims – buried on the territory of our land on the Black Sea. We as mujahideen are obliged not to permit that, using any methods allowed us by the almighty Allah (cited in Bauer 2013).*

From the official rhetoric surrounding the Games it seems that one prominent reason for the choice of location is to improve the infrastructure of the region and to give the area an economic boost, not only up to and during the Games as such but also after them. This is thought to provide a sustainable basis for development and relative affluence afterwards. One can here discern the rationale of achieving sustainable development and stability in a region long regarded as unruly (Petersson 2013). Krasnodar Krai, the region where Sochi is located in administrative terms, has itself seen a fair share of violence in recent years. The basic logic seems to be that if the economy could be boosted through the Olympic project, if jobs could be provided and the regional in-

frastructure in Krasnodar Krai and the North Caucasus in general considerably improved (so far, however, most jobs have been created for guest workers), the region would become more thoroughly embedded in the federation structure. Massive economic investments would then finalize what military operations originally set out to achieve, and money could buy what arms failed to enforce. If the calculus proves to be right, Putin will be able to live up to his image as a strong and resourceful leader. But what if it fails, and what if the Games amount not to a “mega-event but to a mega fiasco” (Trubina 2013)?

With less than one year to the start of the Games, despite measures undertaken by the authorities, experts do not see a decrease in instability and ethnic conflicts in the North Caucasus (Dzutsev 2013a, Vatchagaev 2013a). Rather, as the Games are approaching, the authorities are likely to downplay reports of violence in the North Caucasus (Vatchagaev 2013b). But the problem remains, and in the words of one analyst, the Games are likely to become the most security-loaded in Olympic history (Hedenskog 2013).

As if all this was not enough, there is also the more external aspect of security, with international implications. Only some 30 kilometers from the city of Sochi – and even closer to the sites of the Games – lies Abkhazia, an autonomous republic of Georgia during Soviet times but now a *de facto* state recognized by Russia after the Russo–Georgian war in 2008. The proximity of the Games to this volatile area, and the fact that Abkhazian territory has been used as a supply route for building material for the Olympic facilities, has been interpreted by the Georgian government as a provocative move by the Russians. Critical arguments have been heard that the Russian

policy in this regard amounts to a step-by-step annexation of Abkhazia and only serves to increase tension in an already conflict-ridden region (Kukhianidze 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The Sochi Games are likely to be the occasion for the display of Russia as an indisputable great power, capable of organizing strong, secure and maybe even brilliantly staged Games. The Olympics will be intended to mark and symbolize the comeback of Russia at the supreme world stage, and underline the importance of the leadership of President Putin in this endeavor. Indeed, it is hard to reach any conclusion other than that there is a very specific rationale behind the determination of the Russian authorities to organize the Games in Sochi in spite of all problems, economic, interethnic, security-related and others. The hosting can well be interpreted as a show of force by the Russian authorities to demonstrate firmly to the world who is in command. Seen in this context the choice of location is symbolic. If the Russian Federation can host Olympic Games on the doorstep of a region that has for so long been ridden by conflicts, violence and secessionist sentiments, then internal order can certainly be said to have been successfully restored. Still, even if the rationale does seem clear, the undertaking appears to be like walking a tightrope without a proper safety net. The stakes are high, to say the least.

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