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Winter Olympic Complex Is Built in Turkmenistan

By The Moscow Times

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ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan — The heat-scorched Central Asian nation of Turkmenistan has opened a winter sports complex in a lavish ceremony overseen by the country's authoritarian president as it seeks to compete in the Winter Olympics for the first time.

Some 10,000 people waving white and green balloons packed the arena to capacity one evening last week to watch an opening show of performers singing songs in praise of the president and a display by international figure skaters and circus artists.

Energy-rich Turkmenistan, which gained independence amid the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, has never taken part in the Winter Olympics — and has never won a medal in the summer games — but it plans to send a team to participate in the Sochi 2014 games in southern Russia.

The weather in this largely desert nation varies between warm and blistering highs of 50

degrees Celsius in the summer. Snow is a rare sight.

The winter complex cost some 135 million euros ($185 million) and was built by Turkish construction firm Polimeks. It has facilities for ice hockey and figure skating, as well as training facilities and a 350-bed boarding school.

Turkmenistan has relied on gas export revenues to build gargantuan marble-clad government buildings, presidential complexes and racehorse tracks.

The opening ceremony was marked by adulation for President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov that is common for public events in Turkmenistan.

Berdymukhammedov, who has ruled the country since late 2006, strode in over a long green carpet decorated with motifs from the Turkmen national flag and surrounded on both sides by a cordon of banner-waving youths.

After watching several dozen young men clad in all-white costumes performing acrobatic routines to the strain of Turkmen ditties hailing the virtues of sport and healthy living, he cut the ribbon.

Inside the arena, beneath a large television beaming pictures of a smiling Berdymukhammedov from all four sides, a group of Turkmen singers sang an ode dedicated to the president as a group of children executed figure skating moves.

Major international hockey teams — Ak Bars and Neftyanik from Russia, Poland's Podhale Nowy Targ, and Maribor from Slovenia — arrived to participate in a competition to mark the opening of the arena.

With virtually no experience in winter sports, Turkmenistan will likely have to invest substantial resources into importing the international trainers needed to assemble teams able to take part in major sporting competitions.

Berdymukhammedov has repeatedly stressed his determination to forge a generation of sporting champions in a fashion that bears strong hallmarks of the nation's Soviet past.

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