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Why Sochi Is a Terrible Choice for the Olympics

By Alexei Bayer

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On June 27, Moskovsky Komsomolets published an article about a Russian man who, while skiing, found an iPhone that someone had lost and took it to the local police station. For his trouble, he was arrested, beaten and put on trial after spending four months in pretrial detention.

Tales of police brutality, incompetence and venality of courts and long sentences for the innocent no longer elicit surprise or outrage in Russia. What's significant about this case is that it took place in Sochi, the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics. The man was skiing at the future Alpine venue Krasnaya Polyana. In his prison diary, he alleges that the police, prosecutors and judges run a criminal organization that extorts money and steals businesses from innocent people by keeping them in jail until they pay up.

Moskovsky Komsomolets is a Russian version of an English tabloid: sensationalist, gossipy and not very reliable. Not surprisingly, its version of events is disputed, and the authorities

counter that the arrested man had a criminal record and used the phone for two weeks before being taken into custody. This is part of the problem. The allegations are very serious, they cast a shadow on Sochi law enforcement, and the authorities have promised to look into them. But judging by past experience, there is little chance that an independent investigation will be carried out and that the truth will be convincingly established.

Even if in this instance the police are innocent, it doesn't change the reality of corruption and lawlessness surrounding the Olympics. There have been accusations against Sochi policemen and prosecutors in the past. Earlier this year, a case came to light involving former Judge Dmitry Novikov, who was allegedly tortured by police after he had publicly revealed corruption in the Sochi court system. In April, the International Anti-Corruption Committee, formed in London by Russian human rights campaigners and exiled businessmen, published a list of corrupt Russian officials that contained a number of names from Sochi.

The Sochi Olympics is an exemplary Russian government project. It is a huge white elephant set in a completely unsuitable location — a summer resort with little infrastructure for winter sports — and the recent devastating floods in the Krasnodar region are another reminder of this.

Corruption is endemic in Russia, and almost everything the government undertakes involves stealing and misallocation of funds. Cost overruns are massive. The original $8.5 billion budget may balloon to over $35 billion, making it more costly than the three previous Winter Olympics combined. Misappropriating these enormous sums of public and quasi-public money involves a vast network of corrupt officials at every level in both the Sochi municipal and the Krasnodar region governments.

The problem with these networks is that they act completely independently of the central government. A successful Olympics in Sochi is a matter of honor for President Vladimir Putin, who has been the chief lobbyist for the project from the beginning. But Putin can't control the mafia state that has flourished on his watch. Over the 18 months remaining until the Olympics, bezpredel, the Russian word for complete lawlessness, will only get worse.

The International Olympic Committee should have thought twice before it awarded the Olympics to Sochi five years ago. It must now take partial blame if the lawlessness that we are currently seeing continues into the games — if, for example, a fan is arrested and beaten in police custody during the Sochi games, or if a police officer acts as a lookout for thieves and murderers of visitors to the games.

Alexei Bayer, a□native Muscovite, is a□New York-based economist.

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