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One Year Before Paralympics, Support for Disabled Improving

By Alexander Winning

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Craven, left, launching the one-year countdown to the Sochi Paralympics. **Alexander Astafyev**

With just less than a year to go before the Sochi Winter Paralympics, government officials are talking up the games as a celebration of disabled athletes' dedication and sporting prowess.

But the Sochi games are also likely to draw global attention to Russia's treatment of its roughly 13 million disabled citizens, who have long struggled for access to essential public services and employment opportunities.

Despite patchy wheelchair access and lingering discrimination against the disabled, activists said conditions for handicapped people are gradually improving and expressed hope that Russia's recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities would prompt increased government support.

At a glitzy Red Square ceremony to mark the one-year countdown to the Winter Paralympics

on Thursday, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said the government would do everything in its power to make the games a success.

The eight day games following the Winter Olympics will feature more than 1,300 athletes from 45 countries in five main events: downhill skiing, cross-country skiing, biathlon, sledge hockey and wheelchair curling.

"We are proud to host the Paralympics and have a very strong team," Medvedev said, in a nod to the Russian team's successful showing in Vancouver in 2010, when the country placed second with a haul of 38 medals.

"We always watch the Paralympics with admiration, because they involve strength of will," he said, speaking from a podium erected on the GUM Ice Rink, the onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral lit up behind him.

At the same event, Sir Philipp Craven, president of the International Paralympic Committee, suggested that "Russia could become the most successful Paralympic team in history" on the back of its eye-catching performance in Vancouver.

"Home success and widespread media coverage have the potential to shift attitudes toward people with disabilities and inspire a generation," said Craven, a former champion with the British Paralympic team.

Activists working with disabilities-focused nongovernmental organizations echoed Craven's optimism, seeing the Winter Paralympics, at which Russia has competed since 1994, as an opportunity to bring the fate of the country's physically and mentally disabled population into sharper focus.

"After the success of the Vancouver Paralympics, people started paying more attention to disabled people at home," said Marat Sheikhadinov, aide to the president of the Russian Union of Disabled People, a public group headed by senior officials affiliated with the ruling United Russia party.

"Since then, Russia has signed the UN Convention and is actively working to ensure disabled people's rights. The work is progressing full steam ahead, but it's impossible to make all the necessary changes in one day," he said.

Sheikhadinov noted that authorities have raised pensions and benefits for the disabled and that state-sponsored projects catering to those with disabilities have started to blossom.

One such project, called "The Map of Accessibility" and launched in December 2011, allows users to search the country's largest cities for streets, schools, shops, sports facilities and cultural institutions with wheelchair access.

The Siberian city of Omsk was the most accessible Russian city on the site Monday, with more than 1,000 wheelchair-accessible locations. Sochi and Moscow came in second and third, with roughly 950 and 690 locations, respectively.

Another project, launched by state-controlled automaker AvtoVAZ in July 2011 as a joint venture with German prosthetics manufacturer Ottobock, last year produced more than

35,000 wheelchairs.

Both programs operate alongside the government's flagship Accessible Environment project, a 46.9 billion ruble ($1.53 billion) endeavor that aims to improve accessibility and medical care for the disabled through 2015.

Despite these new initiatives, there is an awareness among NGOs and Labor and Social Services Ministry officials that expanding wheelchair access is just the tip of the iceberg.

For this reason, senior officials including President Vladimir Putin have thrown their weight behind broader programs to build rehabilitation centers, provide specialized schooling for handicapped children and combat public discrimination.

But activists said a sore point for Russia's disabled remains the question of finding work, and 2.6 million out of the country's 3.4 million disabled people of "working age" are unemployed, according to the Labor Ministry. The retirement age for disabled persons is different depending on the disability.

Denise Roza, director of Perspektiva, an NGO seeking to improve the lives of disabled people in Russia and the former Soviet Union, said employment is particularly hard to come by for those with mental disabilities.

"They need special employment programs and supported living arrangements," she said, explaining that the dearth of educational opportunities for disabled people hampers them in later life.

"What's more, although public awareness has risen in recent years, stereotypes persist toward people with disabilities, who often don't know whom to turn to," she said, adding that Russians can expect "huge changes" once the UN Convention is fully implemented.

Oleg Smolin, a State Duma deputy with the Communist Party and vice president of the Russian Paralympic Committee, said that Russian schools remain only "pseudo-inclusive" and that parents of able-bodied children often complain when their children are taught in the same classes as their disabled peers.

Smolin, who is blind, also disputed that real progress had been made in boosting accessibility at institutions of higher learning, citing a discussion at the Presidential Commission on Disabled People's Affairs, at which specialists said only 5 percent of such institutions are fully accessible to wheelchair users, who make up a small fraction of Russia's wider disabled population.

Sounding a more optimistic note, Sheikhadinov, whose organization runs the annual Presidential Soccer Cup for Disabled People, said the Sochi Paralympics could go a long way toward effecting a sea of change in how disabled people are viewed.

"When you see disabled people play sports, you see they pour their whole soul into what they're doing, like it's the meaning of life," he said. "It's much more interesting than your regular game, and I've seen them strike a ball harder than some professional players!"

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