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Kazan Gives Sochi a Lesson in Transportation

By Lena Smirnova

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The Ukranian delegation to Universiade waiting for a delayed flight at Kazan airport last week. **Lena Smirnova**

KAZAN — As drivers in this city muddled through the winter months sitting in traffic jams and avoiding the multitude of streets under repair, many looked upon the upcoming 27th Summer Universiade, with its thousands of visiting athletes and fans besieging their capital in July, with mounting dread.

But while some residents headed out of town to their dachas and garden plots to avoid what they thought would be a congested mess, those left behind were surprised to find that the city's transportation network functioned faster and more efficiently than when it was only being patronized by locals.

"It used to take me over an hour to get to work. During the Universiade, it was half an hour," said local guide Ilnur Nazaniyev as he glanced at Kazan's smoothly flowing traffic from a high

viewing platform. "I'm going to miss this when the Universiade ends."

The Universiade, which took place from July 6 to July 17, is seen as a precursor to the Winter Olympics, which kick off in Sochi on Feb. 7, 2014. But while the two sporting events have some distinct similarities — notably, both are the most expensive to be organized in their respective categories and the largest in terms of the number of athletic events they feature — it remains to be seen if Sochi organizers can match the transportation success that Kazan achieved.

Instead, transport efficiency in Sochi could end up being measured by the fit and durability of footwear.

"If everything in [Sochi] gets clogged up, it would be hard to organize any kind of viable transportation other than walking," said Oleg Nilov, a Duma deputy from Just Russia and a member of the federal transportation committee. "People can get to the Olympic Park on foot. It could be great too. They can then meet other people and see the sights."

The Tartarstan capital, which might bid for the 2024 Olympics, welcomed 10,000 athletes and 20,000 volunteers for the Universiade. More than 150 kilometers of roads were reconstructed or built from scratch to prepare for the largest international event the city had ever seen in its thousand-year history.

The scale of this work resulted in traffic jams lasting several hours, a fact that local resident Daniel Vagizov was still mad about when he spoke to The Moscow Times in February. But by the time the Universiade started, traffic was flowing smoothly, with approximately 2,000 dedicated vans and taxis moving participants between venues.

One of the city's most successful tactics was to make public transportation free for people who hold tickets to any of that day's sporting events. With Kazan bus tickets costing 19 rubles ($0.60), a ride on the metro for 16 rubles and event prices starting at 30 rubles for chess tournaments, fans were stimulated to leave their cars at home and use their tickets to save on commuting costs.

In addition, the local police were stricter about parking violations during the games. The Fontanka.ru blog estimated that 30,000 cars were towed, which helped to reduce bottlenecks.

Meanwhile, key infrastructure came on line in time for the event. Aeroexpress opened its Kazan branch on May 22 and by the end of the games last week had transported 11,200 passengers, 4,200 of them during the games period, said local Aeroexpress executive Dina Garayeva. The same Lastochka train cars being run on the Kazan Aeroexpress route are actually being broken in for use in Sochi.

State-run Kazan International Airport also underwent a 9.5-billion ruble transformation. A new terminal and landing strips were added, an old terminal was reconstructed and 400 new staff hired to deal with the increased passenger flows.

Air passenger flow hit 1,200 travelers per hour during the peak days ahead of the Universiade's opening and after its closing, which was a 40 percent increase from the same

period last year, said Alexei Starostin, director of Kazan's airport.

"This was a push for us and the [Tatarstan] republic in general," Starostin said. "I think that the team dealt with the added pressure very well."

There were a couple of snags along the way, he added, though they were quickly resolved. The Ukrainian delegation suffered a flight delay on July 18 but was given food by the organizing committee during the wait.

Meanwhile, airport workers hurried to process the long registration lines for the post event exodus, eventually matching athletes, coaches, luggage and planes, with help from multilingual volunteers who had come to Kazan from 25 countries.

Even seasoned industry professionals were impressed with the improvement.

"Have you seen Kazan's airport now?" said Aeroflot's stewardess Valentina shortly after take-off for Moscow. "And in Sochi it's just as good."

Members of Sochi's organizing committee went to the Universiade to take note of the local transportation methodology for their own, albeit even more ambitious transformation of the Olympic host city. A working group from Sochi's airport also arrived in Kazan for the closing of the Universiade, though Starostin said that he did not have time to meet them and could not gauge their impression of how well the airport performed at its peak.

Sochi's organizing committee plans to increase the passenger capacity of the city's airport from 1,600 to 3,800 passengers per hour during the Winter Games to accommodate the expected 3.85 million visitors. Sochi will also get 200 kilometers of new railroad tracks by 2014, including a railroad between the seaside and mountain Olympic park clusters, new road interchanges, a bypass road and special lanes for Olympic transport.

Duma Deputy Nilov said he had no doubt that the athletes and VIP guests would find it easy to move around Sochi during the games. Fans, however, are unlikely enjoy the same convenience.

The problem comes down to the sheer scale of the Olympics. Locals are looking forward to the games as an opportunity to earn rental revenue and are adding extra levels to their houses to fit more guests. When filled to capacity, these newly expanded houses would increase the size of the communities tenfold and put even more strain on the already overburdened transportation system, Nilov said.

Walking could then become the only solution available for non-VIP visitors. Nilov said he was a pedestrian at the Olympic Games in Turin, Beijing and Vancouver and that his walking excursions were "pleasant," with many new acquaintances and sights gathered during the half-hour to hour-long treks to event venues.

Regardless of how Sochi fares in terms of city transportation, the one thing Nilov is sure of is that the Winter Games, with a record price tag of $51 billion, will not be a low-key affair.

"If the Sochi Olympics were to be carried out as they were in Vancouver, there would be repercussions for a long time afterwards," Nilov said. "It's not that Vancouver wasn't done

well, but it was an economy class version. All that saving money, modesty, the absence of boasting — this is just not an acceptable way of doing things for Russians."

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