

Putin Lights Olympic Flame on Red Square

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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President Vladimir Putin looking on as a young girl and a boy light a torch from the Olympic flame on Red Square on Sunday evening. **Ivan Sekretarev**

President Vladimir Putin lit a cauldron with the Sochi 2014 Olympic flame Sunday in a grandiose ceremony on Moscow's Red Square marking the beginning of a relay that will see the flame visit almost every corner of the country.

With less than six months before the start of the Winter Olympics in the southern city of Sochi, the flame landed at an airport outside Moscow on Sunday and was transported to the heart of the capital by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, accompanied by a convoy of hundreds of bikers from a Kremlin-affiliated biking group called the Night Wolves.

Dressed in a long black coat, Putin walked along a red carpet and up onto a stage erected specially on Red Square before taking a lit torch from an assistant and setting light to the cauldron.

"Today is a joyous and ceremonial day. The Olympic flame, the symbol of friendship and peace has arrived in Russia," Putin told the gathered crowd. "The Olympics in Sochi really have become a shared task and a shared dream that is becoming a reality."

The only hitch in proceedings occurred shortly after Putin's speech when the torch went out briefly as it was being carried through the Kremlin grounds by Shavarsh Karapetyan, a famous Soviet era swimmer. It was relit with a cigarette lighter by a nearby official.

The first stage of the flame's journey through Russia is a tour of the Kremlin involving 11 torchbearers. They include a four-time Paralympic discus gold medalist, a World War II veteran and a former bobsledder who has taken up television work since suffering severe injuries in a 2009 training accident.

Russia's most decorated synchronized swimmer, Anastasia Davydova, sets off as the first torchbearer of the route through the rest of Moscow on Monday.

The Sochi torch was first lit at a traditional ceremony in Ancient Olympia in Greece last week before arriving in the Russian capital via plane for what will be the longest torch relay in history, a 123-day marathon across nine time zones.

"This relay will be unique, It will cover 65,000 kilometers and will visit all of our regions, and will show Russia to the world as it is and as it appears to its people," Putin said. "Our multiethnic people, a people united by a common goal and by pride in their country."

After two days in Moscow, the relay will go north to St. Petersburg before flying to Far East, looping around the Kamchatka Peninsula, down to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean, and back west across southern Siberia via Lake Baikal, the world's largest freshwater lake.

Highlights of the relay are scheduled to include a trip up Russia's highest mountain, Elbrus, and the sending of an unlit torch into space. The torch will end up in the Black Sea resort of Sochi for the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics on February 7.

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