

With 4 Months Left, Main Sochi Stadium a 'Disaster'

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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Workers walking on the grounds of Fisht Olympic Stadium near the Black Sea coast in Sochi on Sept. 28. The venue remains under construction. **Stanislav Krasilnikov**

At first, Sochi's Fisht Olympic Stadium was meant to resemble a giant snowflake, a symbol of cold weather to balance out the city's palm trees and beaches for the Winter Games.

Then, the design morphed into two parallel mounds of snow, opened down the middle to present views of the jagged peaks of the Caucasus Mountains to the north and the choppy waters of the Black Sea to the south.

But a roof had to be added for the opening ceremonies, turning the stadium into something looking more like a ski slope.

With less than four months before the Sochi Olympics, Fisht is not any of those things yet. The stadium consists largely of a mammoth white frame that juts out toward the sea,

standing in stark contrast to the five other finished venues that now dominate the landscape of the Imeretinskaya Valley. It is the only major Olympic facility still under construction.

"They have not even started to paint the walls inside or lay floors on the concrete staircases," said Alexander Valov, editor of local news website Blogsochi.ru.

If the Sochi Games are emblematic of Russia's mix of ambition and its struggle to reach its lofty goals, then the main Olympic stadium is perhaps the most vivid symbol of this problematic combination.

Preparations for the games, which include upgrading Sochi's infrastructure and building numerous facilities from scratch, are expected to make these Olympics the most expensive in history at a cost of more than \$50 billion. And while officials with the International Olympic Committee praised the state of preparations last month on its last visit to Sochi, even President Vladimir Putin noted "ongoing failures and delays" on his own recent visit to the city. He emphasized that the start date for the games could not be moved.



Olimpstroi

The seaside cluster of Sochi Olympic venues as seen from overhead in July, among them Fisht Stadium and, clockwise from it, two hockey venues, a curling center and two skating arenas.

The bold vision for the 40,000-seat Fisht Olympic Stadium is meant to be commensurate to the scale of the first event it will host: the opening ceremonies of the Winter Games, set to be the country's most dramatic statement to the world in years.

The government has spared no expense in its effort to ensure an awe-inspiring experience, a testament to millions of viewers around the world about the country's achievements during Putin's 13 years in power. But the government also has sacrificed crucial planning time by failing to ensure the on-time completion of the stadium, a Moscow Times investigation

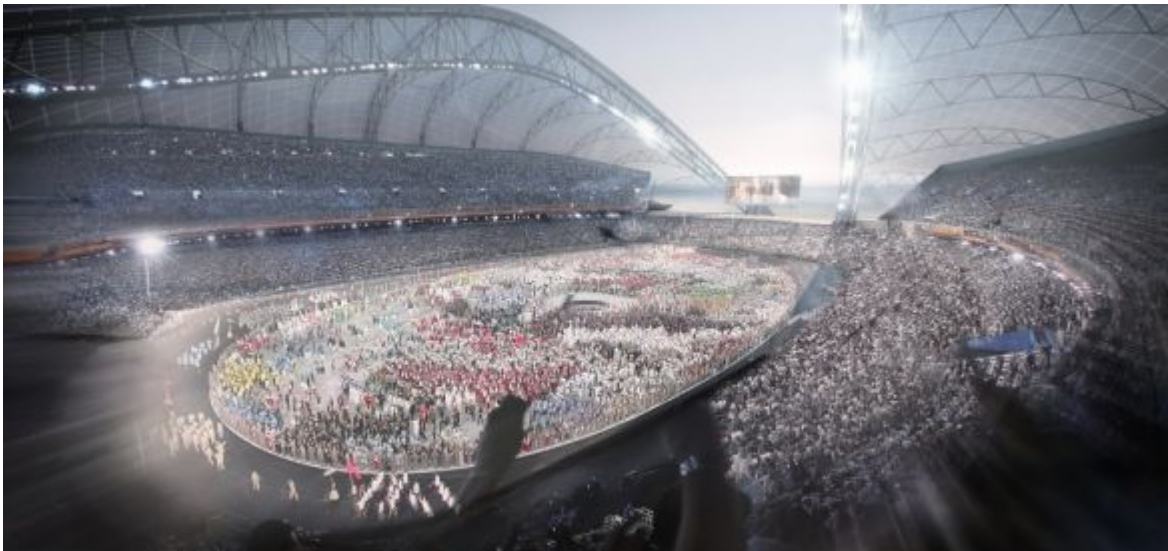
reveals.

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Started in 2009, Fisht was supposed to be finished by this summer to give ceremony planners, led by powerful Channel One television head Konstantin Ernst, ample time to rehearse. But the completion date has now been pushed back to the end of the year due to safety-driven alterations in the design and a desire to produce an exceptional opening show Feb. 7.

That leaves organizers little more than a month to conduct rehearsals and install equipment for the extravagant program.

The stadium's building contractors also face blame for the delays, with a government agency last year accusing them of intentionally impeding progress to create leverage in negotiating prices for their work. Over the four years since planning began, the stadium's cost has reportedly more than doubled, to over \$750 million, while one observer says it now costs more than \$1 billion.



Populous

The winning design for Fisht Stadium by architecture firm Populous. A roof covering the central opening later had to be added.

A Grand Vision

When U.S.-based firm Populous was selected by the Sochi Organizing Committee to design Sochi's main stadium in 2009, the architects had a formidable task to fulfill. Just as China wanted to make a statement with its Bird's Nest stadium in Beijing for the 2008 Summer Games, Russia needed an icon for the 2014 Winter Olympics.

After several preliminary sketches — which included the snowflake, among other designs — Populous came up with a bold image that it believed would express the main idea behind selecting Sochi as the host of the Games.

Two parallel, elongated arches would span the main stands, making them look like two

gigantic heaps of snow. The open space between them would provide views of both the sea and the mountains, underlining the paradoxical decision to hold the Winter Games in a subtropical zone. The Sochi Organizing Committee named the stadium Fisht after a 2,850-meter peak in the western Caucasus Mountains located just to the east of Sochi.

But the most dramatic part of the plan had to be abandoned.



Populous

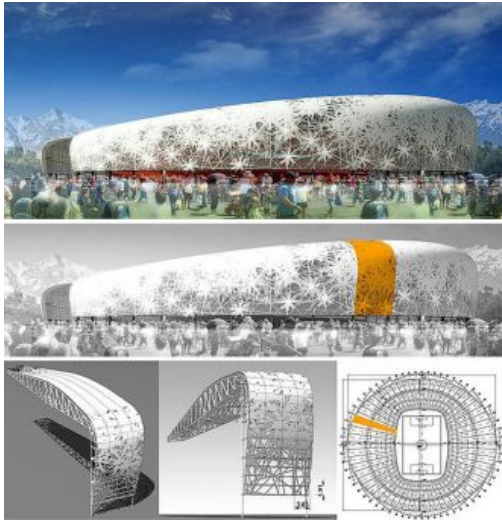
The winning design for Fisht Stadium by architecture firm Populous. A roof covering the central opening later had to be added.

As though in defiance of the design, the surrounding environment, whose riches organizers had wanted to exploit for the games, rebelled in a storm. In December 2009, the torrential weather swept away a port just a few kilometers from the stadium site that had been built to provide access to materials for Olympic venues.

When the organizers learned about the area's occasionally destructive winds, they categorically rejected the idea of an open-roof stadium — partly out of concern for spectators' safety.

According to a source who has been directly involved in the preparations for the opening ceremonies, the organizers insisted that a temporary roof be installed between the two arches, thereby completely changing the original idea of linking the mountain-top ski resorts with the sea in an open space above the bowl of the stadium.

This was necessary, the source said, to ensure that sophisticated lighting and sound equipment could be safely installed and the spectators protected. The source spoke on condition of anonymity, saying he did not want to harm his ongoing work with his business associates.



Populous

The snowflake concept developed by architecture firm Populous.

The roof took more than a year to build — and will take another year to dismantle. For the 2014 Sochi Olympics and Paralympics, the stadium will only be hosting the opening and closing ceremonies, not any sporting events. But after the games, the venue will become a winter home for Russia's national soccer team and host matches during the 2018 World Cup.

"After the Olympics and Paralympics, the stadium will require significant work to modify it and complete it in order to facilitate the legacy requirements for football and other events," Populous architect Damon Lavelle, who has personally overseen the Fisht project, said in an e-mailed statement.

"Ad Hoc" Adjustments

The roof was not the only change made during the stadium's construction.

Boris Nemtsov, a prominent opposition politician and a Sochi native who unsuccessfully ran for mayor there in 2009, said Konstantin Ernst visited the construction site last year and ordered the stadium to be "redesigned" to accommodate a grandiose plan for the opening ceremonies.

Citing sources close to the venue's construction team, Nemtsov said the changes were made on an "ad hoc basis, without being reviewed by experts."

"It is an [expletive] disaster," Nemtsov said angrily in a telephone interview. "The [expletive]," he added, referring to Putin, "wants to dazzle the whole world, so he told the event's organizers to just do it or drop dead!"

A Sochi 2014 representative confirmed that adjustments had been made to the venue following a request from the planners of the opening ceremonies.

"At the initiative of the ceremonies' creative team, certain structural changes were made that were determined by the event's script," the representative said in an e-mailed statement.

But one of the main contractors for the stadium, a company called Ingeokom, disputed Nemtsov's allegation that the changes had been made without proper checks.

"At every stage, a board of experts approved all changes to the final project," said Ingeokom spokesman Kirill Petrov. He refused to provide any details regarding the changes, citing a nondisclosure agreement.

Putin's office had no immediate comment regarding Nemtsov's allegations.



Thomas Peter / Reuters

An artificial palm tree standing in front of Fisht Stadium in Sochi on Oct. 7.

The construction also has been monitored by Populous, the U.S. firm that, apart from handling the Fisht project, has been awarded contracts to design stadiums in Rostov, Kazan and Saransk for the 2018 World Cup. Populous architect Lavelle said he was in Russia just about every week while overseeing the changes to Fisht and working on the other projects.

"The stadium and temporary works are custom-designed to facilitate specific ceremonies performances that have been created over the course of the last 2 1/2 years," Lavelle said in an e-mail.

"The ceremonies are on a scale without precedent in the history of such events," he added. "The stadium project and the ceremonies design and construction have involved a world-class team of top professionals with vast experience."

Ernst, who as Channel One's chief is one of Russia's most powerful media leaders, declined through a secretary to comment on the stadium changes.

'Immeasurable Losses'

By requesting changes to the stadium, the organizers of the opening ceremonies may have inadvertently assisted the venue's contractors in extracting more money for the project.

Last year, the Audit Chamber said it suspected that construction was being held up by the builders to drive up costs.

"The contractors are deliberately procrastinating in order to create a situation in which the government will have to finish the project at any cost," auditor Alexander Piskunov said in a letter to the government, according to an Izvestia report in August 2012.

These delays brought with them significant risks, Piskunov said.

"In August 2013, the stadium must be ready for test events and ceremony rehearsals. However, those involved in the project are not confident that the leadership has a firm determination to finish the work within the set deadline," he said.



Maxim Shemetov / Reuters

A view of the Olympic village in the mountain ski resort of Rosa Khutor, located some 40 kilometers from Sochi.

"If the stadium's opening is delayed, the ceremony's script will have to be changed, which will lead to immeasurable reputational and moral losses."

An Audit Chamber spokeswoman said by phone that she could not confirm the existence of the letter, citing a recent change of leadership at the chamber and a resulting reshuffling of staff. But in the Izvestia report, a spokesman for Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, who

is the point man for the Sochi Olympics in the government, confirmed that the auditor's letter had been received. That spokesman, Ilya Dzhus, told The Moscow Times that he could not recall anything about the letter.

A Sochi 2014 representative said the stadium's projected completion date was now the end of 2013, although Dzhus gave a more optimistic estimate, saying the current plan was to finish it by the end of November.

That leaves artists and technical staff as little as five weeks to prepare the premises for the ceremonies, which is less than the typical amount of time compared to recent Olympic Games. The stadium built for the 2012 Summer Games in London held its first public event in March 2012, six months before the opening ceremonies. And while the National Stadium in Beijing, better known as the Bird's Nest, was officially opened in June 2008, just a few months before the Summer Games, all structural work was completed by the beginning of that year.

Dzhus defended the late completion date, emphasizing that Fisht was a special case because no sporting events will take place there. "Fisht Stadium is a venue that will only host the opening and closing ceremonies, and as such could be finished later," he said.

In the meantime, rehearsals are being held in the Bolshoi Ice Dome, a neighboring ice hockey venue that seats 12,000 people, or nearly one-fourth the capacity of Fisht, according to Valov of Blogsochi.ru.

Rising Costs

The changes and delays to the stadium have apparently brought with them drastically increased costs.

Initially, the government allocated 11.1 billion rubles (\$344 million) for the stadium, but last year the builders requested more than double that amount, 23.5 billion (\$729 million), Izvestia reported. Other news reports have cited the final cost as being about \$780 million.

Nemtsov said that according to his information, the cost has surpassed \$1 billion, which would make it one of the most expensive stadiums in the world.

A representative for Olimpstroy, the umbrella company responsible for construction of all Olympic venues, refused to provide an official comment on the stadium's cost or on the Audit Chamber letter. The Audit Chamber spokeswoman said most of the documents relating to the chamber's financial evaluations of Olympic construction sites were not available to public.

The source, who has been involved in planning the opening ceremonies, pinned the blame for the delays squarely on Olimpstroy, noting that the state corporation has gone through four chief executives since being founded in 2007. These changes of leadership have made it nearly impossible for the company to maintain control over the dozens of contractors working on the stadium, the source said.

With less than four months left before the opening ceremonies, it seems that the builders are finally making a push to finish the venue — but they are not displaying much confidence that they will succeed.

"Before, I used to see only a few dozen workers there, but now there are a few hundred," said Valov, the editor of Blogsochi.ru, speaking after a recent visit to the construction site.

"I saw Olimpstroy president Sergei Gaplikov running around the stadium, looking perplexed and anxious," Valov said. "He even asked me to delete all the pictures of the stadium that I had made, but I told him he had no right to force me to do that."

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