

Sochi Games Signal Change for Russia's Disabled

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November 04, 2013

The  Moscow Times

KHIMKI, Moscow Region — Russia's embrace of the Sochi Paralympic Games and its increasing concern about the hardships of its disabled population could spark further improvement in the condition of the country's handicapped individuals, the head of a Russian nongovernmental organization said.

"There has been lots of change for people living with disabilities in the past 10 years, and even more in the last three," Denise Roza, director of Perspektiva, an NGO that strives to improve the well-being of disabled people in Russia, said by phone. "The Russian government has been much more serious about it, and I think the Sochi Paralympics will help raise public awareness and contribute to maintaining positive change."

With less than 100 days to go before the Sochi Olympics, this observation comes as a refreshing break from the controversy about Russia's law banning "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations" and its impact on the games.

While Russia's disabled citizens still face onerous challenges in their daily lives, the government has shown a willingness to tackle some of their problems. And Sochi has helped.

In a sign of the country's changing attitude toward people with disabilities, Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko and Vladimir Lukin, Russia's human rights ombudsman and the president of the Russian Paralympic Committee, opened "Return to Life," a celebration of Russia's brightest paralympians, at the Novogorsk Training Center in Khimki on Friday.

Such attention from high-ranking officials would have been unimaginable a few decades ago in Russia. The Soviet Union refused to host the Paralympics along with the 1980 Summer Olympics because the regime claimed the country had no disabled people.

While some may say Mutko is no champion of individual rights in light of his statement in August that Russia's anti-gay propaganda law would be enforced in Sochi despite an international outcry, Friday's festivities focused on the depoliticized aspects of the games.

"You are a model for the people sitting at home watching you," Mutko told the athletes. "You are truly courageous people, and I am convinced your performances will inspire many."

Speaking on behalf of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak congratulated the athletes for "raising the status of Russia as a sports powerhouse."

The high-profile event also saw the participation of Russian billionaire Oleg Boyko, pop star Alexei Vorobyov, renowned sports commentator Dmitry Guberniyev and the president of the International Paralympic Committee, Sir Philip Craven.

Mikhalina Lysova and Roman Petushkov, biathletes and cross-country skiers who won numerous medals at the 2013 world championships, and Alexandra Frantseva, a three-time world champion in downhill skiing, were among those recognized for their achievements.

Sochi is set to host 692 paralympians from 47 countries, including 62 athletes from Russia, at the Paralympic Games from March 7 to 16, two weeks after the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games. Athletes with physical and intellectual disabilities will compete in five events: alpine skiing, biathlon, cross-country skiing, sledge hockey and wheelchair curling.

The price of tickets for Paralympic events ranges from 350 rubles (\$10.91) to 1,500 rubles. While they are more affordable than Olympic tickets, which can cost between \$15.60 and \$1,060, Paralympic tickets prove harder to sell as the games do not have the same appeal as the Olympic Games.

Sochi itself, a remote city of 340,000 nestled between the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea, is expected to affect attendance.

"I do not think there will be that many spectators in Sochi. But the most important people — the people who are interested in what we do — will be there," said Konstantin Lobanov, the goaltender of Russia's sledge-hockey team.

Private initiatives have been launched to help fill the stands. Telecommunications company MegaFon and Perspektiva have teamed up to send 15 disabled young Russians to the Paralympic Games as part of the "I Am a Leader!" contest.

And thanks to significant efforts by the Sochi 2014 Olympic Organizing Committee, disabled spectators, as well as athletes, will be able to easily circulate within and among the venues.

According to Human Rights Watch, the committee took measures to ensure that venues, facilities and transportation were accessible for everyone. More than 300 buses — about one-third of the Olympic fleet — will be accessible to people with disabilities.

State measures to improve the condition of Russia's disabled began in 2008, when Russia signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities a year after having been awarded the Sochi Games.

In 2011, Russia launched the four-year, multibillion-ruble Accessible Environment Program to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities by making everyday activities more accessible. The program's measures include increasing the quantity of subtitles on public television, building inclusive and accessible schools, sports facilities and transportation infrastructure.

By 2015, 45 percent of public and transportation facilities should be accessible to disabled people.

Russia is home to an estimated 13 million disabled people, accounting for 9 percent of the country's population. According to Lukin, only 3.5 percent of disabled Russians currently engage in physical activity.

"We need to make stores and transportation accessible and comfortable for people with disabilities," said Ramil Ilalutdinov, who won a gold medal at the Paralympic Biathlon and Cross Country Ski World Cup in March. "It can be difficult for disabled people to live their lives here."

Human Rights Watch cites physical confinement to homes, a lack of accessible public sidewalks and street crossings, and lack of access to employment and health care as some of the obstacles that Russia's disabled population faces. They also often carry heavy psychological burdens.

"Isolation is a big problem for disabled people in Russia," said Roza, director of Perspektiva. "Attitudes about them are still distorted because many people have never met or talked to disabled people."

Sochi has been used to try and change the popular perception of disabled Russians. More than 300 torchbearers for the 65,000-kilometer relay across all 83 regions of Russia are people with disabilities.

"When we hear announcements about Sochi, we always hear that the city is hosting both the Olympic and the Paralympic Games," said Roza. "It is great to see disabled people integrated to this extent in the process."

"Our mentality is changing about people with disabilities," said Lobanov, the goaltender. "Before, people would not understand why I was on crutches, and some would even point at me."

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/11/04/sochi-games-signal-change-for-russias-disabled-a2919>

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