

Olympic Volunteers Don't Know the Rules

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SOCHI — Some 25,000 young volunteers descended on Sochi this week to finalize preparations for the Winter Olympics and to assist visitors during the games.

The volunteers, whose average age is 25, come from all corners of Russia and even other countries. From all appearances, they are delighted to gather in the warm weather of this Black Sea resort. Many of them have never left their hometowns, much less seen the sea.

But the volunteers, easily recognized by their colorful blue jackets, aren't completely up to speed on the dos and don'ts of their jobs.

Take, for example, Maxim and Bator, who came to Sochi from the Far Eastern town of Blagoveshchensk, which is on the border with China and almost 8,500 kilometers away.

I approached them on a central Sochi square after they finished their work Wednesday evening and asked them to identify the Olympic values, which are listed in their training manual and were taught to them during preparatory classes.

The two young men struggled to remember the Olympic motto, which is "Faster, Higher, Stronger." Confusing them was the fact that the manual, prepared by the Sochi organizing committee, also offers its own group of values for the 2014 games: "Perfection, Friendship, Respect."

Maxim and Bator also failed to remember that the manual bans them from talking about politics, religion "and other debatable subjects," as well as "taking actions that can be interpreted as an insult against religion, race and nationality."

For some reason, sexual orientation is not mentioned in the manual, and it is not clear whether volunteers are allowed to discuss them.

"We were given the manual, but we haven't read it yet. There hasn't been enough time," Bator said.

"What we do remember," he added, "is that we are not allowed to smoke in uniform."

All volunteers have been given a set of clothes that includes shoes, raincoats and polo shirts. On Wednesday, a set surfaced online with an asking price of 10,000 rubles (\$285), prompting local bloggers to joke darkly that a would-be suicide bomber could purchase the uniform to avoid detection from the police.

The idea of making money off their uniforms had probably never entered the minds of Maxim and Bator. The young men were friendly and cheerful. But they also forget one of the most important rules of their manual: Volunteers are not allowed to speak with reporters.

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