

Sochi Ready for Some, Not for Others

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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President Putin arriving at the welcome ceremony in the Olympic Village. **Vadim Ghirda**

As the Olympic Torch arrived in Sochi on Wednesday and President Vladimir Putin personally presided over the raising of the Russian flag in the Olympic Village, the Internet was abuzz with tales of construction blunders and the popular Twitter hashtag "#Sochiproblems."

No secret has been made about the significance of the Sochi games for Russia's image, and many observers have described them as Putin's pet project. In 2007, he personally appealed to the International Olympic Committee for Russia's bid to host the 2014 Olympic Games.

Seven years later — and two days before the games — Sochi has found itself in the spotlight, but perhaps not for all the right reasons.

Critics have complained that construction of Olympic facilities is not yet complete, and the international press has been having a field day with apparent "Sochi problems" since their arrival a few days ago.

Tweets from foreign journalists erupted Wednesday morning, with many complaining of substandard accommodation, lack of Internet, or elevators that did not work.

Anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny quickly picked up on a Washington Post story that rounded up "hilarious and gross hotel experiences" by Western journalists.

Navalny translated the story for his Russian audience.

As of Wednesday afternoon, six of nine hotels were ready, and it was not clear when the remaining three would be completed. Journalists were reportedly informed that some of the expected amenities, like blankets, would simply not be arriving.

Others complained of missing doorknobs, broken lamps and drinking water said by hotel staff to be "dangerous."

Mark MacKinnon, a reporter for The Globe, wrote: "For those of you asking, when there is no lobby in your hotel, you go to the owner's bedroom to check in."

Photos showed stray dogs wandering the area, some inside the facilities.

Meanwhile, Putin reassured critics that everything was ready for the Games and paid a visit to the Olympic Village. There, he addressed the Russian Olympic Committee's delegation, which consists of the Russian Olympic team, their coaches and officials. He also attended the hoisting of the Russian tricolor flag before addressing the crowd.

"Russia has spent seven years preparing for this," he said, adding that "Russia is prepared to host the games."

Putin also said that he was pleased "to see that there was complete consensus, as they say in such cases, on the idea of holding these Games and hosting this event," according to a transcript on the Kremlin's website.

A poll published Wednesday by the Levada Center seemed to contradict Putin's statement, however, showing that nearly 30 percent of the Russian population was skeptical about the Games.

Twenty-six percent of respondents said they were uncertain about the real purpose of hosting the Games, while 53 percent said they thought that hosting the Winter Olympics was the right thing to do.

The closest thing to a national consensus in the poll was that 85 percent of Russians expected their team to place in the top five in terms of total medals won.

The poll was taken at the end of January, and 1,603 respondents from 45 regions across Russia participated. The margin of error did not exceed 3.4 percent.

The poll also addressed a major controversial issue surrounding the preparations for the Games: corruption. Nearly half of the Russians surveyed said they believed corruption and waste were the cause of the Games' massive price tag. Thirty-four percent placed the blame on greedy and careless construction companies.

Putin, for his part, attributed the delays to the difficulties inherent in constructing an Olympic venue from scratch, saying that "building in an open field is not so hard, but building the mountain cluster was a very difficult task."

Officials involved in organizing the Games, including Putin, have repeatedly placed the total cost at 214 billion rubles (\$6 billion), saying that less than 50 percent of that had been taken from the state budget.

Critics of the Games have accused officials of exploiting the event for financial gain, and that claim was echoed by 38 percent of respondents in the Levada poll, who said officials saw the Games as "an opportunity for graft."

Another 23 percent said Russia decided to host the Games in order to contribute to the development of sports and unite the nation.

Regardless of the reason for hosting the Games, the show has begun.

Putin said he would take advantage of the gathering of world leaders in Sochi attending the opening ceremony on Friday to discuss with them pressing international issues, including the civil war still raging in Syria, Afghanistan's uncertain future, and Ukraine.

"I am sure that the Olympics are a good occasion to discuss the issues in a calm, benevolent atmosphere," he said, Voice of Russia reported.

"We need to make the most of this opportunity in order to look for such points of contact and move forward to solve problems. And the world has lots of them," he said.

In the absence of many prominent Western leaders, however, including U.S. President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Putin will likely dominate these discussions.

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