

Putin Watches Russian Hockey Defeat

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February 16, 2014

The  **Moscow Times**

SOCHI — Political overtones reared their head at the Sochi Winter Olympics on Saturday night as Russia and the U.S. played each other in a tense hockey game.

After the Cold War hockey rivals found themselves tied 2-2 at the end of overtime, the U.S. team won after eight rounds of shootouts — but not without controversy. A disallowed goal by Russia earlier in the game led many to criticize the U.S. victory as unfair, with some observers joking that the American referee who had refused to count what would have been Russia's winning goal should be evacuated from the country for his own safety.

Russia's defeat did not eliminate the team from the tournament, but it has forced it to play a qualifying game to make it into quarterfinals.

President Vladimir Putin watched the game closely from the stands, along with IOC president Thomas Bach, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and the Kremlin's chief-of-staff Sergei Ivanov.

At the Live Site venue in central Sochi, where the game was broadcast live on two big screens, the mood was agitated.

"Of course this is not just a game for us," said one spectator, Viktor Goncharov.

"They are our main enemies; the result will have much more significance than just for sports," he said.

No one would dispute that the game was thrilling, keeping everyone on the edge of their seats until the very end.

Judging by the behavior of spectators in Sochi, though, both Russian and American fans were mostly amicable, with many saying they "did not care about politics."

In one touching scene at the end of the game, an American man tried to cheer up a disappointed Russian girl by lifting her up on his shoulders.

Many Russians were not so easy to console, however, and Twitter was quickly flooded with accusations and indignation over Russia's "stolen" goal, which was disallowed because the net was displaced at the moment the puck went in.

Alexei Pushkov, a United Russia deputy and the head of the Duma's International Affairs Committee, called the game's outcome an "abomination" on Twitter.

"Cheating before the whole world! Disgusting!" he wrote.

U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul was asked to explain the American referee's "cheating" by several users on Twitter.

Even gay rights activist Nikolai Alexeyev and opposition campaigner Alexei Navalny expressed outrage over the discounted goal.

Alexeyev tweeted expletives at the U.S. ambassador and said that Russia had clearly been duped out of a win, while Navalny said he agreed with "everything being said about the referee."

The outrage is perhaps not surprising considering the context of the game.

Tensions were high even before the match kicked off, with many calling it a rematch for the famous "Miracle on Ice" game in 1980, when the U.S. national team inflicted a surprise defeat against the Soviet Union's "Big Red Machine" at the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's national team has failed to win an Olympic gold, a fact which put more pressure on Saturday's players.

Putin seemed to take the defeat in stride, however, saying "sport is sport" after the game.

The president had visited the team houses of U.S. and Canada and rubbed shoulders with the hockey rivals a day earlier.

At the U.S. house, he chatted with U.S. Olympic Committee CEO Scott Blackmun and the committee's chairman, Larry Probst. Putin wore a Team USA Valentine's Day pin and appeared cordial, removing many of the lingering tensions over the U.S. role in the LGBT rights scandal that dominated the pre-Olympic media coverage of the Games.

Putin tasted some wine — which had already been tasted by his security beforehand — and said simply, "this wine is good."

Canadians presented Putin with a pair of red maple leaf gloves.

The president tried to charm the Canadians in return, saying that he "wishes them luck, but not in hockey."

He also said he hoped Russia would play against Canada in the finals.

Canadians were quick to respond, with the president of the national Olympic committee calling the Games "fantastic" and "perhaps the best in history."

At a meeting Saturday with Bach, Putin was also offered some praise for the Olympics.

"The Games are organized so well and everything is proceeding so smoothly that we do not even need to hold regular coordination meetings: there are no problems, therefore we have nothing to discuss," he said.

Bach also said that the Games had already attracted a record high television audience across the world and offered special praise for the work of Olympic volunteers.

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