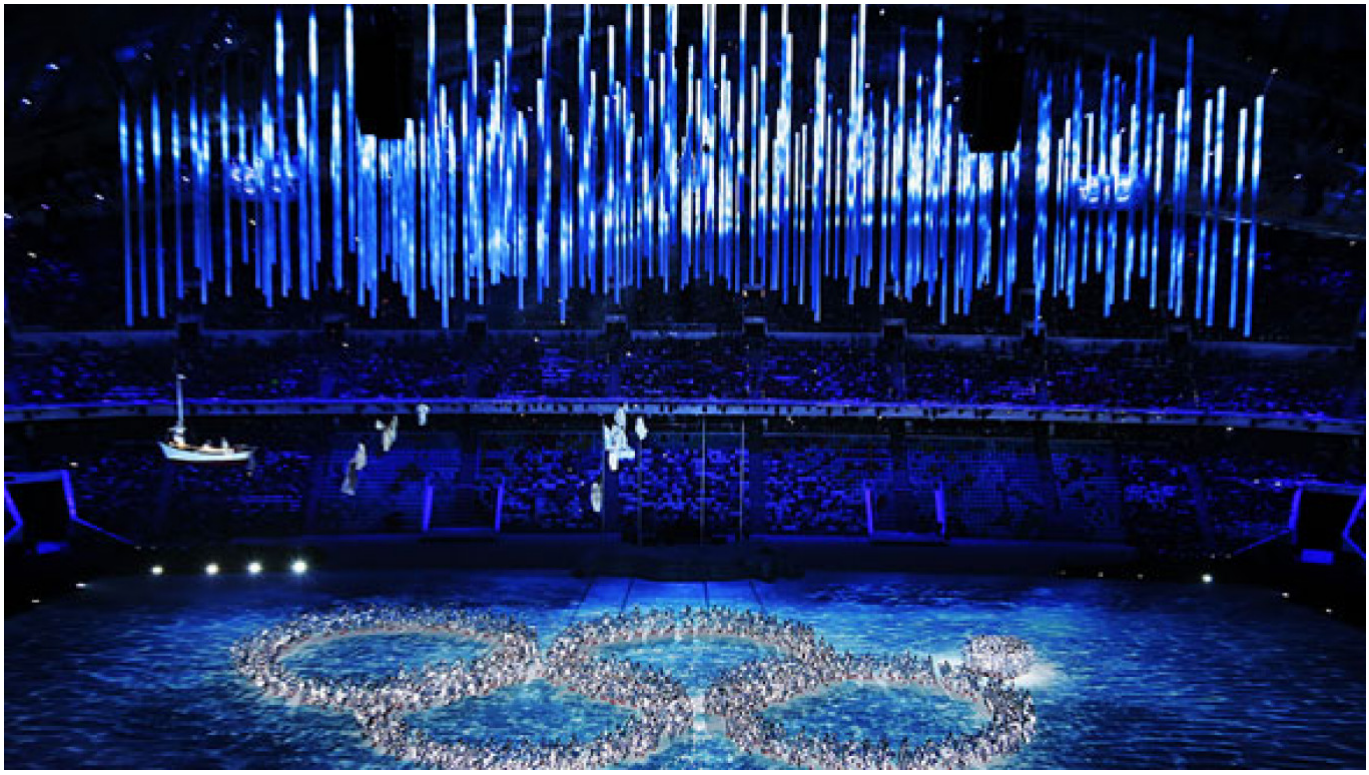
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Sochi Hailed as Success Despite Minor Blips

By Ivan Nechepurenko

February 23, 2014



Performers at the closing ceremony recreating the Olympic ring that failed to open at the opening ceremony. **Ivan Sekretarev**

SOCHI — As President Vladimir Putin declared the 2014 Winter Olympics closed on Sunday, the International Olympic Committee's president said the Sochi Games had "proven critics wrong" and praised the Russian president's handling of the event.

"We saw excellent Games and what counts most is the opinions of the athletes, and they were enormously satisfied," Thomas Bach said.

Concerns over possible terrorist attacks, botched facilities, unfinished hotels and human rights seemed all but forgotten as soon as the Games kicked off with a lavish opening ceremony and proceeded smoothly, with athletes unanimously expressing satisfaction.

But by the end of the Olympics, several incidents threatened to put Russia's newly polished

image to the test, with political turmoil in neighboring Ukraine and an embarrassing video of security officers beating Pussy Riot members in Sochi at risk of overshadowing the Games' success.

Just as Russia achieved the impressive feat of topping the Olympic total and gold medal count — showing the best result the country has had during all Winter Olympics — Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted amid violence and chaos in nearby Kiev. The images of a nervous and confused Yanukovych addressing the nation in a video in which he refused to recognize the parliament that had just voted to impeach him stood in stark contrast with the image of him cheerfully waving the Ukrainian flag weeks earlier at the opening ceremony in Sochi.

The turbulent power reshuffle in Ukraine prompted speculation about how it would reflect on Russia, with some saying Yanukovych's removal could prove embarrassing for Moscow.

Russia faced a sporting disappointement earlier on, when the national men's hockey team failed to win, continuing the losing streak that has plagued Russia's signature sport for decades.

Three-time Olympic champion and legendary goaltender Vladislav Tretiak said he was sad the Olympics were wrapping up, but he did not think the hockey defeat was the end of the world.

"I hope that after the end of the Games, all sports facilities in Sochi will be used and will serve our people, and we can still win in hockey one day in the future," he said, walking along the seaside in central Sochi.

Visitors to the Games seemed equally wistful that the festivities were over, but most said it was an experience that they would not forget any time soon.

"I liked my experience in Sochi very much — the most memorable moment was the opening ceremony, which I was very lucky to attend," said Tatiana Rumiantseva, 53. Rumiantseva worked as a volunteer at the Laura Cross-country Ski and Biathlon Center.

The positive feedback will likely be pleasing to Putin's ears, as he personally played a major role in preparations.

Bach praised Putin for being present at most of the events in Sochi, saying "we would be sitting here in a very different mood" if the president and other members of the government had not made such great efforts.

Bach also said Putin had fully respected the principles laid out in the Olympic Charter.

"I would not remember any kind of action by him where he would step over the border making gestures or undertaking steps which would not be legitimate," Bach said, Reuters reported.

The Games were widely seen as a landmark project to burnish Putin's legacy as a political leader and to present a more modern and friendly image of the country he has led for more than 14 years.

On Saturday, Deputy Prime Ministry Dmitry Kozak implied that such a task had been successful.

"The Games have turned our country, its culture and the people into something that is a lot closer and more appealing and understandable for the rest of the world," Kozak said during a news conference.

Yet, the Games also gave the world some images of Russia that Kozak would likely want to hide. Toward the end of the Games, members of Pussy Riot who were attempted to stage a performance were detained multiple times and beaten with a horsewhip by security officers right in central Sochi. Video of the incident quickly went viral, renewing earlier concerns about Russia's human rights record.

Kozak was quick to dismiss these fears, however.

"The girls came here with the specific aim of provoking conflict," said Kozak, who was appointed by Putin to be the main force behind the Sochi Olympic effort.

"They had been looking for it for a long time, and in the end they succeeded in having a conflict with local residents," he said.

The incident had no impact on attendance of the Games.

More than 100,000 people visited Sochi's Olympic Park every day, with organizers saying more than 1.176 million tickets to numerous sporting events had been sold to spectators from 126 different countries.

Security, another major concern ahead of the Games, especially in light of Sochi's proximity to the restive North Caucasus, turned out to be less pervasive than many expected.

The Greater Sochi area, which was circumvented by a so-called "ring of steel" to keep potential terrorists out, was flooded with law enforcement officials from the get-go.

But visitors said the strong security presence did not affect their experience any more than it would have in other countries.

"In a way it felt very similar to London; everyone was very excited and the atmosphere was very nice," said Agmad Farida Noor, 28, a school teacher from the U.S.

According to Noor, the Games exceeded her expectations, but the most difficult part was applying for a visa and finding accommodation.

More than $50 billion was spent on the festivities, with the bulk of the sum invested into revamping Sochi's infrastructure. The scale of the project triggered multiple allegations of corruption, with prominent opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny claiming that government officials and contractors had siphoned off at least one-third of the funds allocated for the Games.

Many residents of Sochi were equally wary about the price tag, but by the end of the Games, the Olympic atmosphere seemed to have cheered them up.

"If Sochi turns into a winter resort, then I think the spending was worth it," said Galina, 48, a housekeeper who refused to give her last name over privacy concerns.

"It is difficult to fully comprehend the scale of the sum, but when you come to the Olympic Park you feel proud of your country," she said.

More than 20,000 hotel rooms and four new ski resorts were erected in Sochi, raising fears that the Olympic venues would require additional government spending to maintain.

"We work on this issue by trying to fill the city with events, and we already have a busy schedule," Kozak said.

In 2013, 3.8 million tourists visited Sochi, and Sochi Mayor Anatoly Pakhomov said he expects the figure to get a post-Olympic boost of at least 30 percent.

With the Sochi Olympics over, the city will also host Paralympic Games in two weeks.
The event is already sold out, according to Kozak, who has also said that the government will support St. Petersburg's bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics "if St. Petersburgers solicit our support."

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