

Paralympians Unfazed by Crimea Crisis (Video)

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The Norwegian sledge hockey team playing against Sweden on Tuesday.

KRASNAYA POLYANA — The ongoing Paralympic Games taking place only 300 kilometers from Crimea may have been untouched by Western criticism over Russia's human rights record, but it has been overshadowed by Russian involvement in the Ukraine crisis.

Ukrainian athletes made their dissatisfaction with Russia's actions known ahead of a visit by President Vladimir Putin to Sochi on Saturday.

The first Ukrainian athlete to win a medal at the Paralympics, Olena Iurkovska, dedicated her victory on Saturday to "an independent Ukraine" at a medal ceremony after the the women's 6-kilometer sitting biathlon.

No Ukrainian athletes or visitors were on site Monday and Tuesday. A request to meet with them went unanswered.

While participation of Ukrainian athletes was in question as the Games started because of the deployment of Russian troops in Crimea, Ukraine's Paralympic Committee's president Valery Suskevich told Putin at a meeting over the weekend that his country's team had agreed to stay.

The athletes warned that they would withdraw from the Games if there was any further advancement of Russian troops into Ukrainian territory, however.

Most of the athletes opted to focus more on sports than political divisions. And as the temperature reached 22 degrees Celsius on Monday and trees began to blossom, the change of the season gave paralympians an extra challenge to overcome: the melting snow.

Watch the scene at the Paralympics, including fans on the Sochi streets and Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko hugging people.

Russian athletes have nonetheless managed to dominate the medals table.

Some Ukrainian athletes have found themselves facing defeat by their Russian competitors.

But Russian fans and athletes received special praise from the International Paralympic Committee on Tuesday for being supportive of everyone involved in the Games, not just their fellow countrymen.

"The Russian crowds deserve huge credit for making these Games a huge success. Their vocal support has inspired the athletes and, what has pleased me the most, is that their support has not just been for Russian athletes but for athletes from all 45 countries," International Paralympic Committee president Phil Craven said in a statement.

"It is the Paralympic effect in action. No matter where the Games go, they have an ability to transform sports fans into sports fans for all, supporting all sides and all athletes," he said, adding that the Paralympic Games had exceeded all expectations.

While some Ukrainian athletes went out of their way to express support for Ukrainians back home, the significance of Craven's words was not lost on any of them, and they refused to let politics tarnish the Games.

"This is sport. This is not about politics," Maksym Yarovyi said, after being beaten by Russian athlete Roman Petushkov, Reuters reported.

"I really appreciate and really support all sportsmen no matter what their nationality is," Yarovyi said.

On Tuesday, Russia continued its winning streak at the Games, securing three gold medals in a single day. Azat Karachurin won gold in the men's biathlon after Alena Kaufman won her second gold in the women's biathlon 10-kilometer standing event and Roman Petushkov claimed his third gold medal in the 12.5-kilometer sitting biathlon earlier in the day.

Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko seemed to be reveling in Russia's successful run, as he was spotted singing and dancing in the middle of a group of Cossack dancers and singers

on Monday. They were all performing in the middle of a makeshift Cossack village that could easily be mistaken for a Ukrainian one.

Vladislav Lopatin, a resident of Sochi, emphasized the difference between Russian and Ukrainian Cossacks while standing in the audience.

"There used to be just a small Cossack farm here," he said, pointing to the surrounding mountains that are now home to a multitude of freshly built ski resorts.

"I could not believe it was the same place when I came back here for the first time during the Olympics," he said with awe.

Lopatin expressed his support for Crimea's accession to Russia, adding that he gets his news from the state-run Rossia-24 news channel.

"We must accept them, it is our territory anyway," he said.

Ola Branholm, a middle-aged reporter for a Swedish sports news channel, said he was happy that the Ukrainian athletes had decided to compete and not let political issues interfere with the Games.

"Russians cheered for Ukrainians just as much as they did for the Russian athletes," he said.

Alexei Sakhinin, 39, a resident of Omsk in Siberia, painted the Ukrainian blue and yellow flag on his face in a show of solidarity with Ukrainian athletes and people.

"Politics is a mess, but all Ukrainians clearly need our support today," he said, standing on the Laura Biathlon Complex's stands on Tuesday.

"I think we should praise Ukrainian athletes, who came here to compete knowing how difficult it is at home," he said.

One of Branholm's friends, Helene Ripa, won a gold medal on Monday, while another one, Zebastian Modin, scored a bronze. On Monday afternoon, Branholm was waiting with his friends beside a ski lift for the winners to come and celebrate.

"Ukraine is the number one subject now," he said with his friends, all of them nodding.

"But here we concentrate on sports," he said.

The Swedish athletes and visitors said they were very satisfied with the conditions in Sochi, giving special praise to the hotel where they were staying. Incidentally, the hotel they mentioned was one of the media's hotels that received multiple complaints from journalists ahead of the Winter Olympics in February.

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