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Regret and Relief for Kazakhs at Losing Winter Olympics Again

By The Moscow Times

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An employee makes preparations before the announcement of the city to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games at the Abai square in Almaty, Kazakhstan, July 31, 2015.

Kazakhs reacted to losing their bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympics with a mixture of disappointment in missing out on the global prestige and relief at not being saddled with what some saw as a state vanity project.

About 4,000 people gathered in the scorching heat of Almaty's central square to watch the announcement on big screens. After seeing Beijing beat their city by 44 votes to 40, they folded up their flags, handed them back to the organizers and went home, leaving a few people to weep.

"We are overwhelmed with emotions," said Galiya Asylbekova, 52, with tears in her eyes. "It's a shame. It's the prestige of the country, and Kazakhstan should have won."

Svetlana, a pensioner in her seventies, tried to comfort her: "Well, we will surely win in 2026. We may not live that long to see it, but our youth definitely will."

Overlooked by the snow-capped Tien Shan mountains, Kazakhstan's biggest city had vaunted the compact layout of its venues, 70 percent of them already built, and a combination of moderate costs and reliable winters with natural snow.

After failing to win the 2014 Games, which went to Russia's Sochi, many Kazakhs see the persistent Olympic bids as an attempt to please strongman President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled for 26 years.

Nazarbayev had said the Games would "make the names of Kazakhstan and Almaty ring out across the world."

News of the bid's failure was hailed by skeptics who took to social media to express their relief with ill-hidden sarcasm.

"I wonder, who will be that person to crawl into (Nazarbayev's) office and tell him this terrible news?" said Facebook user Altai Baishulakov.

"Hooray! The Olympics will be held in China, and our budget will not be plundered," lawyer Ruslan Dzhusungaliyev, a 45-year-old Almaty resident, said on his Facebook page.

An officially sponsored rally in the capital Astana was abruptly cancelled.

In Kuala Lumpur where the results were announced, the vice chairman of Almaty's bid team took the defeat in his stride.

"By bidding for the Winter Games we showed the world the amazing progress that Kazakhstan has made since its independence," Andrey Kryukov said. "This alone is a major victory for our country."

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