

Russia Turns to Old Security Toolbox for World Cup

A new order by Vladimir Putin calls for increased searches, stricter residency rules and restrictions on protest

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Peter Kovalev / TASS

Until 2015, Boston, Massachusetts was a contender for the Olympics. The United States Olympic Committee wanted the city to vie for the right to host the 2024 Summer Games.

Locals, however, balked at the idea. They weren't ready for years of construction, traffic jams, heightened security and floods of tourists. Their tax money should go elsewhere, they argued. Ultimately, the mayor pulled Boston's bid to host the Olympics.

Muscovites might find it easy to understand Boston's apprehensions as their city gears up to host two major football events—the FIFA Confederation Cup next month and the 2018 World

Cup. In the runup to these expensive prestige projects, the Kremlin has fallen into an old pattern of heavy-handed restrictions. On May 9, President Vladimir Putin signed an order heightening security before, during and after the two tournaments. Amongst broad prescriptions, the order calls for increased searches, stricter residency rules and restrictions on protests.

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Russia has a history of heavy-handedness during major sporting events. In 1980, Moscow played host to the Olympic Games. Just eight years after Palestinian terrorists massacred Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, Soviet authorities feared security threats. But subtlety was not their strongest suit.

Authorities demolished shabby dachas lining the road from the airport. They dispatched leading dissident Andrei Sakharov into internal exile. Other dissidents and “undesirables,” such as homeless people and former criminals, were also removed from the city. Non-Muscovites were essentially barred from entering the city for the duration of the games. And when an Italian gay activist attempted to protest Soviet anti-gay laws, he was beaten and detained by KGB agents.

In 2014, when Russia hosted the Winter Olympic Games in the resort town Sochi, security was even tighter. Located near the restive North Caucasus, Sochi appeared to be an easy target for the Islamic insurgents in the region.

Besides restricting who could enter the Olympic zone, the authorities deployed over 40 thousand security forces. Spectators were required to undergo background checks. Any protests in Sochi, outside an Olympic-mandated “free speech zone,” required FSB approval. The Kremlin also had another trick up its sleeve: intense cyber surveillance.

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Russia is not the only country to grapple with security ahead of a major sports event. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Greece struggled to ratchet up security in time for the 2004 Athens Games, with journalists reporting serious weaknesses less than a year before the opening ceremony. Ultimately, security in Greece was extreme. NATO even provided planes, ships and biochemical warfare defense forces to ensure the safety of the athletes and spectators. The Games went off without a hitch.

But the sheer cost and challenge of pulling off a major sporting event explains why democratic states are increasingly wary of the idea of hosting the Olympics. Citizens object to the costs and inconveniences of such events.

This is where countries like Russia, on the other hand, have a competitive advantage. With an authoritarian political system and pre-existing free speech restrictions, Russia will get the prestige of playing host without having to address citizen grievances or legal restraints. Cyber surveillance, which the FSB will undoubtedly employ for the two upcoming football tournaments, seldom provokes a politically significant backlash.

Regardless of who prevails in the World Cup, Russia will no doubt win the security championship.

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