

Sochi: games with frontiers

by Gerald Stang

Russia is often seen as a land of extremes – and the narratives for this month’s Winter Olympics in Sochi reflect that view. From the record-length 65,000 km Olympic torch run (which included trips to outer space, the north pole and the bottom of the world’s deepest lake) to the incredible \$51 billion price tag and the Ian Flemingesque threat of attacks from black widow terrorists, the Sochi games have a distinctly Russian flavour. The Kremlin appears to have envisioned the games as a national triumph, not unlike the 2008 Beijing Olympics, with organisational, architectural and sporting successes that could unite the country. However, with global headlines dominated by stories of corruption, human rights abuses, anti-gay laws and the very real threat of terrorist attacks, one might be forgiven for wondering whether the Russian government regrets its decision to bid for the games.

Hosting the Olympics can be a risky prospect, particularly if the chosen venue is a beachfront summer resort tasked with organising winter events. While a bit of good luck and pre-planning can overcome potential weather problems, Sochi’s security challenges remain a major worry. The Olympic Park constructed to host the opening ceremonies is located a mere 5 km from Russia’s border with Abkhazia, the breakaway Georgian province that

remains occupied by Russian troops more than five years after the 2008 war. In response to continued worries about the threat of terrorist attacks, Russian security services extended the security zone for the games deep into Georgia, and Putin may even invite the leaders of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia to an opening dinner for foreign heads of state. That Moscow can casually use recently ‘conquered’ territory to ensure protection for an event attended by the whole world is indicative of Russia’s clout. Yet the necessity for such an extensive security perimeter highlights the fragility of Russia’s position.

Unrest, terror and sport

The Sochi Olympics will be Russia’s first winter games (after the 1980 summer games in Moscow), although Sochi also bid to host them in 1995. The ongoing war in the Russian republic of Chechnya, a few hundred kilometres away, inevitably cast a shadow over that first bid. The First Chechen War ended with the humiliating withdrawal of Russian troops in 1996 but a surge of Islamist Chechen fighters into the neighbouring Russian republic of Dagestan in 1999 instigated a Second Chechen War. Under the direction of new Prime Minister, then President, Vladimir Putin, this war ended



with a convincing Russian victory – at great cost, but with the installation of a Moscow-friendly strongman to run the republic.

By 2007, when Sochi won its second Olympic bid, Russian troops were slowly disengaging from Chechnya, with security increasingly in the hands of police and internal security services. Today, Chechnya is merely the most restive of a group of troubled republics in the region. The International Crisis Group reported more than 700 people killed by conflict across the northern Caucasus in 2012, while terrorist attacks across Russia have been traced back to operatives from the region. The military victory in Chechnya, and the years of unrest and terrorism that have followed, set the tone for Putin's dominance to this day: the use of raw force to shape a powerful, authoritarian Russia, but beset by worries of terrorist violence and political uncertainty.

Putin has been focused on restoring the economic and political power that was lost with the dissolution of the USSR and the chaos of the Yeltsin years. Under Yeltsin, Russia's economy shrunk every year but one; when the government defaulted on its debts during the 1998 rouble crisis, it was merely the culmination of a decade of collapse. From 1999 to 2013 – the years covering Putin's tenure as prime minister and president – the economy grew every year but one. This impressive record has been

matched with high numbers for employment, income and, unsurprisingly, Putin's popularity. The Sochi games may be the costliest of all time but they seem popular with most Russians, and the government has no shortage of cash. In 2012, Russia ranked only behind Saudi Arabia in oil exports, shipping as much as the next three largest exporters combined (UAE, Kuwait and Nigeria). It is also, by far, the world's largest exporter of natural gas.

The Sochi Olympics will be like no other games because Russia is a country like no other. It has immense linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, but is centrally run from Moscow. While none of the centrifugal forces at the fringes of this empire are capable of open rebellion, Russia suffers from more terrorist attacks than almost any other country. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland found that Russia was the target of almost 1,900 attacks from 1991 to 2012. Including the restive Chechnya and Dagestan republics, there have been more than 150 attacks per year from 2008 to 2012. The most recent attacks in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) in December 2013 claimed 34 lives.

Western officials have described a terrorist attack in Sochi during the Olympics as 'very likely to occur'. The leader of the Caucasus Emirate, a militant

group seeking to establish an independent Islamic state in Russia's northern Caucasus, has called for strikes against the Sochi games. Police have issued leaflets identifying three possible suicide bombers that may be in the area, including the 'black widow' of an Islamist militant. While discussions of gay rights issues have been prominent in public analysis of why many Western leaders are avoiding the games, the potential threat to their security may be the most important reason.

Since the attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich games, security concerns have been paramount for Olympic organisers. Except for a bomb that killed two, and very nearly many more, at the 1996 Atlanta games, the Olympics have remained peaceful. Security spending has skyrocketed at recent events to ensure that this trend continues. The security bill for the 2012 London games was \$1.6 billion and the 2008 Beijing Olympics had an estimated security cost of \$6.5 billion. For Sochi, the security costs may be even higher as the state tries to manage multiple potential threats. The two clusters of games facilities are the focus of the most concentrated security operation, described as a 'ring of steel', making a successful attack quite difficult. The city of Sochi and the surrounding areas form the next ring of potential targets. Finally, the rest of the country – spanning 9 time zones – could be considered an Olympic target if attacked during the games.

Why host the Olympics?

With so much that can go wrong, it is worth asking why countries compete so fiercely to host Olympic games. The calculation for bidding seems to involve a mix of wishful economic thinking, grabbing at a chance to show off on the international stage and hope that the resultant boost in national pride can generate domestic political advantages.

Measuring the costs and benefits of hosting any large sporting event is a notoriously difficult task. The winter games have historically been held in small centres with access to ski slopes, while

summer games are more often held in larger urban agglomerations. The five short-listed cities for the 2012 summer games were London, Paris, New York, Moscow and Madrid. For the 2014 winter games, only Pyeongchang and Salzburg were shortlisted with Sochi while the other applicant cities were Jaca, Almaty, Sofia and Borjomi. Despite massive growth over the years – in terms of events, spectators and money involved – the winter games remain much smaller than the summer games, with approximately a quarter of the athletes, events and venues. This makes it all the more shocking that Sochi will cost even more than the much larger 2008 Beijing summer games, which previously held the record for the most expensive Olympics.

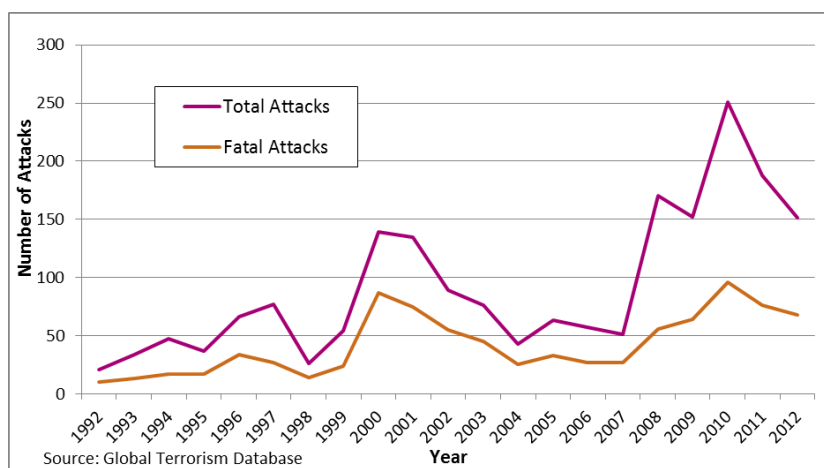
The benefits claimed for hosting the games include boosted civic pride, job creation, urban renewal, increased tourism and improved infrastructure in

multiple categories: athletics facilities, roads, airports, public transit and, especially for developing countries, telecommunications capacity. This can facilitate long-term economic growth as businesses take advantage of the opportunities provided by the new infrastructure. Sochi, a city of just over 300,000, will clearly benefit from

its share of the estimated \$51 billion in Olympic expenditure. The opacity of the spending and the vast amounts lost to corruption, however, make it difficult to determine how much has been spent – or where. Russia's original bid included a price tag of \$12 billion, which would have made it the most expensive winter games ever. Considering that almost \$9 billion was spent just on the construction of the short road and railway between the coastal resort and the alpine events area, it is not a surprise that the total bill ballooned by over 400%.

The experience of past Olympics shows that hosting the games can be a massively expensive undertaking. It took Montreal 30 years to pay off the debt it incurred by hosting the 1976 Olympics. Athens may never pay off the debts from its 2004 games. Bidding countries, however, seem more likely to focus on perceived successes such as Los Angeles, which made money on its 1984 games, and Barcelona, which saw a boom in tourism after the 1992 games. For many countries, however, the Olympics are about more

Terrorist attacks in Russia, 1992-2012



than just economic payoff. Countries bid to host the Olympics because they are usually popular enough with the public to allow for non-economic benefits to factor heavily into the decision. The games are an opportunity to showcase national development and achievement. International approval is important, but mostly for how it can feed into national pride at Olympic success.

For Russia, the years of Olympic preparation have involved a significant, and not artificial, build-up of national pride for a country that has a history of success in Olympic competitions. For every Olympic Games from 1956 to 1994, both winter and summer, the USSR/CIS/Russia finished first or second in both the gold medal and the overall medal standings. Since then, they have gradually slipped down the medal tables, hitting a low of 11th in gold and 6th overall at the 2010 winter games. The Sochi games, from the torch relay to the spectacular new venues to the expected gold medals, are supposed to indicate Russia's triumphal return to glory.

Rights, bids and BRICS

The return to a place of international pre-eminence was also a key goal for China's past Olympic bids. Beijing's first bid in 1993 was unsuccessful, arguably because it was so soon after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. When Beijing eventually won the right to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, worries over China's poor human rights record were prominent. By inviting the world in for the games, however, host countries are subjected to media exposure and political pressures that could potentially lead to changed approaches on human rights issues. For China, there was no clear adjustment in government policies, with widespread reports of dissident crackdowns and media censorship in the years before and after the games. In the end, the Beijing games were widely seen as a success both internationally and inside China, where pride at the country's accomplishments in hosting the games and dominating the medals standings have reflected well upon the ruling regime.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics have been described as a coming-out party for China, displaying to the world its capacity to host a complex and high-profile event in impressive style. In 2008, however, China was already seen as a vibrant and modernising power. Russia may look at the Chinese experience as a successful model, but the stakes are different. Russia is seen by the world less as an impressive rising power than as a surly former great power worried about holding on to what it has.

While China was accused of stifling dissidents in the lead-up to the Beijing games, Vladimir Putin instead offered amnesties to a long list of prisoners, including the protest band Pussy Riot and former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. This move could be seen as a mollifying gesture intended to defuse Western criticisms, or it may have some other motive. Deciphering the reasoning behind Putin's political manoeuvres can be a tricky business.

However Russians view the amnesties, the Olympics themselves are popular. Apart from the unlikely event of a large-scale terrorist attack, the Olympics seem destined to serve as a demonstration of the still-popular Putin regime's capacity to host a world class event on its own terms. Should this come true, future potential Olympic hosts may draw similar lessons from the Sochi games and the Beijing games: hosting a successful Olympics can win plaudits at home, while sermons from outsiders have little traction. Prior to 2000, only a small fraction of bids for the summer games came from outside the developed democracies. Since the turn of the century, more than half do. Istanbul has attempted, and lost, five different Olympic bids. With China's 2008 Olympics, South Africa's 2010 World Cup, Brazil's 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics, and Russia's 2014 Olympics and 2018 World Cup, the BRICS nations have latched onto the idea of hosting major sporting events as indicators of rising status. Many other developing countries are increasingly prepared to host the games, despite all the attendant difficulties and the glare of the international spotlight.

The Sochi Olympics are widely seen as a manifestation of Russia's resurgence, a symbol of Moscow's pacification of the northern Caucasus and a legacy project for Vladimir Putin. It is possible, however, that too much importance is attached to the games. Like all Olympics, they are still just a spectacle: a sporting event designed to entertain and provide an opportunity to wave the flag.

And for Sochi, the games mark only the beginning of its time in the spotlight. The city is scheduled to host Formula One races for the next seven years and football matches for the 2018 World Cup. More importantly, Sochi will host the next EU-Russia summit on 3 June 2014, immediately followed by the G8 summit on 4-5 June. In addition to difficult discussions on Syria, Ukraine and human rights, the world leaders who skipped the Olympics will get a second chance to see what \$51 billion can buy.

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