

The Five Extraordinary Features of the Sochi Winter Olympics

Written by Bill Bowring

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BILL BOWRING, JAN 24 2014

On 7 February 2014, the Sochi Winter Olympics will commence. It is estimated that these games will cost at least US\$51 billion – the most expensive in history – costing Russia more than the \$40 billion that China spent on the 2008 Summer Olympics. The UK spent some US\$15 billion on the Summer Olympics in 2012. Sochi was selected as the host city in July 2007, during the 119th International Olympic Committee Session held in Guatemala City. At that time the games were estimated to cost US\$12 billion; the cost of these extravagant games has therefore quadrupled. The offer of US\$12 billion from Russia dwarfed the bids of the other finalists from South Korea and Austria. The Sochi Winter Olympics have five extraordinary features, each of which this article will now examine.

An Olympic Park has now been constructed in the Imeretinsky Valley on the coast of the Black Sea, with the Fisht Olympic Stadium and the Games' indoor venues located within walking distance. Snow events will be held at Krasnaya Polyana in the Caucasus mountains, and a lavishly-appointed brand new railway, with trains by Siemens, has been constructed. Therefore the first extraordinary feature of the Sochi Winter Olympics is that they are being held in, and near, a sub-tropical seaside resort. At any rate, snow has recently fallen in the mountains, and Russia may not have to use the enormous quantity of artificial snow for which provision has been made.

The second prominent feature is the exceptional degree of lavish spending, and allegations of corruption (Yaffa 2014). In a lengthy article, Joshua Yaffa gives details of 21 contracts handed out to close childhood friends of President Putin, the brothers Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, totalling US\$7 billion – 14% of the total expenditure. Yaffa relates that few criminal cases have been initiated; however, in June 2012 investigators from the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation opened a case against contractors at two venues – the main Fisht Olympic Stadium, which will only be used for the opening and closing ceremonies, and the bobsled course. The investigators alleged that the contractors inflated costs by submitting false or unjustified project estimates. The alleged losses to the state budget amounted to nearly US\$170 million at the stadium and US\$75 million at the bobsledding venue. However, in an interview with foreign media on 20 January 2014, President Putin denied that there was any evidence of corruption, although he acknowledged that there had been attempts to raise prices – as, he said, would happen in any country. Further, the construction work has been dogged by many allegations of gross environmental damage in a very fragile set of ecosystems; and of exploitation and serious abuses of the rights of the mainly foreign labour force.

Third, the fact that the games have been located in Sochi demonstrates extreme insensitivity or disregard for some of the many non-Russian peoples of the Russian Federation. Sochi is of great significance to the Circassian people, who suffered genocide at the hands of the Russian Empire in 1864. Zhemukhov points out (2012, 597) that the Sochi Games marks the 150th anniversary of the defeat of the Circassians in 1864 at the hands of Tsar Aleksandr II, after they fought for 101 years in the brutal and bloody Russian-Caucasus War. Sochi was the site of the war's last battles, and the port from which most of the Circassians were deported to the Ottoman Empire. Krasnaya Polana itself was the place at which, on 12 May 1864, Russian soldiers paraded to celebrate victory at the end of the war. Indeed, Sochi was the last capital of independent Circassia from 1861 to 1864, and is named after the Circassian ethnic group *Shache*, who lived there until 1864.

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Until the Genocide, all the Adygey (properly, Circassian) sub-ethnoses lived in a common territory as “Circassians”, but the community was decimated after 1864 (Khakuasheva 2013, Goble 2013). The Soviet government took steps to divide the Circassian populations into five separate political units: the Russian Federation ethnic Republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeya (an autonomous entity within Krasnodar Krai), as well as the Shapsug District of Krasnodar Krai and the Mozdok District of the Republic of North Ossetiya. The Soviet regime also actively suppressed information about the Russian-Caucasus War. Khakuasheva argues that as the Sochi Olympics draw closer, there is an information war the main goal of which is to liquidate all traces of the war – and of the Genocide. The Circassians have resisted and continue to resist. Deluguian (2005) has pointed to “truly mass mobilisation” processes in the post-Soviet Caucasus. The Abkhaz people, closely linked to the Circassians, broke violently from Georgia after the collapse of the USSR, and have pursued their own goals of sovereignty.

Russia’s recognition of the generally unrecognised republic of Abkhazia following the 2008 Russian-Georgian war has further complicated the issues. Zhemukhov (2012, 521) observes that the Circassian movement has been very active since 1989, developing a clear ideology, and pursuing its strategic goals. The fact of the Genocide has been recognised by the parliaments of Kabardino-Balkaria (1992), Adygeya (1996), Abkhazia (1997) and Georgia (2011). Indeed, Georgia, smarting from defeat in 2008, has actively encouraged and supported the Circassian movement. There are many more links with the huge Circassian diaspora in Turkey and elsewhere, and many Circassians have visited their homeland. These issues will most certainly haunt the Sochi Olympics.

Fourth, is the issue of militant jihadist movements in the Caucasus. The city of Volgograd, just north of the Caucasus, suffered a suicide bombing in October 2013 when a female suicide bomber blew herself up on a city bus, killing six passengers, most of them teenagers. On 29 and 30 December 2013 the city suffered two more bombings, first at the city’s main train station, and second on a trolleybus, killing another 30 people. On 20 January 2014 two members of a militant group “Vilayat Daghestan” posted a video online, in which they claimed responsibility for the December bombings, and threatened to attack the Sochi Olympics.

The Russian authorities have placed a ring of steel around Sochi, but there are growing fears that there could be further attacks close to or in Sochi itself. The leading Russian expert of the Russian security services, Andrei Soldatov, wrote (2013): “It seems the Russian secret services do not understand that maintaining control over everyone and everything (essentially the idea inherited from the Soviet past) and preventing a terrorist attack are far from being the same thing.”

Fifth, there is the high-profile issue of the law against “homosexual information”. On 30 June 2013, President Putin signed into law new legislation which passed the Russian parliament in a very short space of time: the State Duma voted almost unanimously in favour at the start of June 2013, and the upper house, the Federation Council, on 26 June 2013. This has caused the most controversy internationally, with calls for Coca-Cola to withdraw its sponsorship, and a number of world leaders announcing that they will not come to Sochi. The law was entitled “On the protection of children from information causing harm to their health and development”, and amended a number of Russian laws as well as the Code on Administrative Misdemeanors.

From 1 July 2013 when the law came into force, the “spreading of information directed to the forming in adolescents of non-traditional sexual arrangements” became an offence. The propaganda of non-traditional sexual attitudes among children would be punishable by a fine of 4,000 to 5,000 roubles for individuals, for responsible persons 40,000 to 50,000 roubles, and for legal persons from 800,000 to 1 million roubles (£18,000). Imprisonment for a term of up to 90 days may also be imposed. Aggravating circumstances include use of the mass media and internet, in which case the fine for an individual could reach 100,000 roubles, and for a responsible person: 200,000.

The first prosecution under the new law has now taken place. On Tuesday 3 December 2013 the Arkhangelsk court convicted the well-known Russian LGBT activist Nikolai Alekseev under the new law and fined him 4,000 roubles after he conducted a one-man picket at the entrance to the Archangel Childrens Library No.3.

On 19 January 2014, in an interview with the BBC’s Andrew Marr, President Putin insisted that gay people face no discrimination at work or in society in Russia, and the new law did not harm anybody – its aim was purely to protect

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children. He said: "I myself know some people who are gay. We're on friendly terms. I'm not prejudiced in any way."

For these five reasons, the Sochi Winter Olympics are highly controversial even before they start, and there remains a real potential for unexpected events and even bloodshed.

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About the author:

Professor Bill Bowring is a practising barrister, and teaches Human Rights and Public International Law at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is Chair of the European Human Rights Advocacy Centre (EHRAC), taking cases to the European Court of Human Rights against Russia and other post-Soviet countries; is active in the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers and the Bar Human Rights Committee; and is a Trustee of the Redress Trust, and of Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights (LPHR). He is the author of more than 100 publications. His most recent book is *Law, Rights and Ideology in Russia: Landmarks in the Destiny of a Great Power* (Routledge, 2013).