

FROM SOCHI TO RIO: PUTIN'S RUSSIA IN THE OLYMPIC MIRROR



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Russia is an Olympic power. As with all other international actors, its politics and sport normally go hand in hand. Especially when it comes to large-scale sporting events with global impact. In fact, far from being an exception, Russia has been a perfect exponent of this dynamic for decades. Beginning with its first participation in the Olympics in 1952, sport was a propitious field for the USSR to demonstrate the supposed Soviet superiority over the capitalist world. Nowadays, Putin's Russia, without this ideological dimension, is also committed to using large sporting events as a means of political legitimation before global and domestic audiences. Hence, the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi were conceived as the official presentation to the world of the *new, great, open* Russia that was leaving the traumas of the 90s behind and returning to first place on the international scene.

Sochi was, and is, a personal endeavour for President Putin. The old Soviet riviera would be converted into a “*new world class resort for the new Russia. And the whole world!*”, he pledged at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) meeting in Guatemala in July 2007. As well as the Winter Olympics, since 2014 Sochi has hosted the Russian Formula One Grand Prix and it is the Russian president's summer residence, where he often receives the leaders of other countries and holds summits, such as the Russia-ASEAN one held in May 2016. Nevertheless, beyond its place on the Kremlin's official agenda, Sochi is still a long way from being a global point of reference. It does not even seem to be so for local tourism.

During the Sochi games in February 2014 the Kremlin was greatly triumphant, with President Putin seen on various occasions *enthusiastically celebrating* the victories of Russian athletes. Russia, in fact, finished top of the Sochi medal table. By contrast, surveys made at the time by the independent Levada Center suggest that Russian citizens did not share this level of enthusiasm. Fundamentally, this was due to the high costs and the suspicions of widespread corruption. The initial estimated cost of Sochi was \$12 billion, but it rose as high as \$55 billion, making the Sochi games the most expensive in history, including all of the summer games, which typically require less investment. The issue of overspending seems

more acute when we consider that it is largely attributed to embezzlement and that practically all the funding came from public sources – although partially camouflaged by large state-owned corporations such as Gazprom. In this way, Sochi became a reflection of the prevailing corruption that is deeply rooted in the bowels of Putinist Russia.

Thus, more than the open country announced in 2007, Sochi reflected the Russia where all political dissidence is suppressed. And thus, although it was an isolated incident, the attack of the punk band Pussy Riot suffered at the hands of a group of Cossacks deployed as a paramilitary support force must be mentioned. The members of the group were **gassed, beaten and then whipped** by a Cossack using his traditional *nagaika* (whip) even while on the ground.

“Sochi today. The world tomorrow” read the campaign slogan of the public bank, Sberbank, imbued with the pursuit of greatness to which the Kremlin aspires. Unintentionally, the message became ironically premonitory. As the Olympic flame went out in Sochi, the military operation began that would lead to the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine. This, in turn, would result in the progressive distancing from the West and the current escalation of sanctions and counter-sanctions.

This tense, confrontational setting is the context in which the Russian doping scandal arises that has put Russia's very participation in the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in question. The issue exploded in November when a report by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) was made public in which it condemned the **“existence of a sophisticated and well established system of state-sponsored doping within the All-Russia Athletics Federation”**. The report was followed by **journalists' revelations** of details on the workings of this wide-reaching doping system, in which the FSB (the successor organisation to the KGB) allegedly ran a parallel (secret) laboratory in Sochi to falsify Russian athletes' tests. The sudden and unexpected death last February of two former directors of Russia's anti-doping agency, one shortly after contacting a British newspaper, has done nothing but intensify the suspicions.

Given the seriousness of the revelations in the WADA report, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has banned Russia from participation in Rio de Janeiro. The first reaction of the Russian sports minister, Vitaly Mutko, was to point to the conspiracy theory according to which the veto had political motivations and was part of the West's **“information war”** against Russia. That is to say, one more item to feed the Putinist narrative and paranoia about the siege by a *perfidious West* seeking to overthrow him and usurp power in Russia.

At the same time, the Russian authorities sought to refocus the situation and announced their willingness to collaborate with the IAAF. Nevertheless, on June 17th the IAAF communicated its decision to uphold the veto, given the non-compliance with the 44 readmission requirements imposed in November. Finally, in search of conciliation, the IOC, the supreme Olympic organisation, has made it known that they will allow the participation of Russian athletes under the Russian flag – not the Olympic one as was speculated – as long as they demonstrate that they are clean and subject themselves to the checks each

sports federation imposes. At the time of writing, only 2 out of the 136 Russian athletes who have applied for “exceptional eligibility” have been accepted so far. The All-Russian Athletics Federation (ARAF) has appealed the ban at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (TAS) whose decision is expected on July 21.

Russia is back at the centre of the international stage, but neither for the reasons nor, in all probability, in the manner expected by the Kremlin. If Sochi and the doping scandal reflected anything it is not the *new, great, open* Russia announced in 2007, but rather the darker aspects of Putinism: corruption, deception and the central role of the espionage services. The games in Rio have, thus, become a test of the international credibility and propriety of Putin’s Russia. It remains to be seen whether it will finish that test in the medals.

