

SOCHI 2014 AND MOSCOW 1980 - OLYMPIC GAMES WITH SERIOUS PROBLEMS



Moscow and Sochi will forever be linked for having hosted the Olympic Games. Surprisingly, the fact that both these cities' Games have been the subject of bureaucratic machinations and highly-publicized scandals is one of the many things they have in common.

Just like Moscow in 1980, the Sochi Winter Olympics set for 2014 have been plagued by concerns about inflated budgets as the opening day draws closer. It was originally estimated that the Sochi games would cost about \$12 billion to host. **This figure has gradually been increased to surpass \$50 billion currently, far exceeding the previous record of \$15 billion that Athens spent to host the Games in 2004.**

With every decision concerning Sochi having to be made by the president while state resources are used widely in the organization of the Games, current trends surrounding next year's Winter Olympics seem to be a throwback to the Soviet era. Putin's management of the whole process has already drawn criticism from the West, something that's reminiscent of the 61-nation boycott of the Moscow Games. All this has served to intensify the publicity concerning rampant corruption and labor abuses that have been common through the entire organization of the Games.

Such issues and concerns have led to speculation that Putin might reconsider hosting next year's Winter Olympics because the never-ending scandals have forced a rising number of organizations and well-known activists to call for a boycott of Sochi 2014 entirely.

Brezhnev was faced with an almost duplicate situation. He also apparently had similar concerns in 1980, when he rightly feared that hosting that year's Summer Olympics in Moscow would only exacerbate his country's already dire economic situation. As it turned out, he was proved right in both cases: the threatened boycott materialized and the Soviet economy plunged following the Moscow Olympics.

While the Russian economy is relatively stable nowadays, a similar boycott of next year's Winter Games in Sochi would not only damage Putin's formidable reputation, it would also tarnish Russia's credibility as one of the planet's economic giants.

Any talk of snubbing the Sochi Games can however be dismissed as mostly hot air. Such calls have nonetheless intensified in recent days due to the passage of a contentious anti-gay propaganda law in Russia. The law has led to renewed efforts to shun the Sochi Games as a way of highlighting Moscow's dismal human rights track record. Combining this with the ill-treatment of the mostly migrant workers who are building the Games infrastructure and you begin to see that the activists are perhaps justified in their boycott quest.

Ongoing clean-up to rid Sochi's surroundings of any "undesirables" has also been quite controversial and even drawn in the wrath of animal rights activists protesting the cruelty used in removing the city's over 2000 stray animals. To get everything clean and orderly prior to the commencement of the Games, Putin has been issuing all sorts of decrees that are widely considered to breach citizen rights. Banning rallies and limiting people's freedom of movement may not seem as draconian as forced evictions, but all these measures have been applied to Sochi in one way or another.

The entire infrastructure necessary to prepare Sochi for next year's Winter Olympics had to be built from scratch, unlike Moscow which already possessed most of the required facilities to host 1980's events. The question also remains on what to do with all the installations in Sochi after the Olympic event is over. Sochi is a small resort city with a very small population when compared to Moscow and there is widespread concern that all the stadiums, hotels, roads, etc., will not find enough users to ensure profitable use once the Winter Olympics are over. Despite all these issues, Sochi is still a bit behind schedule in its preparations, leading to a lot of criticism from both the IOC and Russian Government.

While Sochi's legacy remains to be seen, critics remain concerned that the troubled development of all the impressive facilities, plagued with rampant corruption and built by indentured labor, may turn out to not have been worth it because of gloomy long-term prospects.

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