When the Party Is Over: Developments in Sochi and Russia after the Olympics 2014

Bo Petersson, Karina Vamling and Alexandra Yatsyk

Bo Petersson and Karina Vamling, Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

Alexandra Yatsyk, Kazan University, Kazan, Russia

bo.petersson@mah.se

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Perhaps the Sochi Olympics in 2014 attracted the greatest attention before they even took place. Both in the media and in academic debates numerous predictions forecast that these Olympic Games would become ones to remember, but neither for positive reasons nor for the sports achievements that they recorded.

To start with there was the somewhat odd fact that the Winter Games were to be arranged in a subtropical climate zone, which made the construction works complicated and unprecedentedly expensive. Moreover, in environmental terms the Games were to take place in unique natural surroundings, and were believed to bring adverse effects to the sensitive biotope and the unique flora and fauna in the area (Petersson & Vamling 2015). The organization of the Games in Sochi was riding roughshod over the interests of the indigenous group of Circassians, who waged an intensive campaign of dissent and opposition to protest against the Games, trying to gain international recognition for their cause (Zhemukhov 2014; Zhemukhov 2012; Hansen 2013). The security problems were expected to be huge, as the Games were to take place in a location adjacent to regions of the Russian North Caucasus that had since decades become known as the unruly corner of the Russian Federation, and as a hotbed for separatist sentiments and militant groups. Consequently, there was a perceived risk of terrorist attacks (Hedenskog 2013). On top of it all, the Games were marred by economic malfeasance, embezzlement and fraud, contributing to making them the most expensive Olympic Games ever (Nemtsov & Martynyuk 2013; Müller 2014). All these issues were connected to the general political context of the Games, namely that the sports events were to take place in a city situated in an authoritarian state. That is where the story of this special issue starts.

Over the years and across widely diverging political contexts a long series of events has proved the linkage between sports and politics in the history of the Olympics, of course with the Berlin Summer Olympics in 1936 as the most extreme example (Hill 1992; Senn 1999). Another instance testifying to the intertwining of sport and politics was the Summer Olympics arranged in Moscow in 1980, which rather late in the life of the Soviet Union was an attempt to confer international legitimacy and recognition on the already waning superpower. For its part, the successor of sorts, the Sochi Games, was part and parcel of a Russian show of force that symbolized that Russia, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the general disarray of the 1990s, had returned with a vengeance to the international arena, again intent on playing the role of a global great power (Persson and Petersson 2014; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2014; Gronskeya and Makarychev 2014). This turn of fortune was intimately associated with the name and person of Vladimir Putin, Russia's president and its strongman since the end of the 1990s. The Sochi Olympics was from the outset his pet project, and it would never even have been conceivable had it not been for his commitment and his personal appearance, at the time officially as the Russian Prime Minister, in Guatemala City in 2007 where the International Olympic Committee selected Sochi as host city of the Winter Games in 2014. Making the Sochi Olympics project a reality came to be an important vehicle for Putin to further enhance his popularity at home, and awarded him additional legitimacy as an international political leader (Petersson 2014).

Against this background, two important and interrelated factors should be taken into account when analyzing Putin's Olympics project. First, it epitomized a powerful and consistent boost in Russian patriotic feelings, begun already in the late 1990s and spurred by an assertive narrative about the country's rightful legacy, its justifiable right to be treated with respect and its comeback as a major global power. Second, the Olympics project legitimized what might be called, in Schmittean terms, the state of sovereign exception as based on

political will and the right and ability of political leaders to take decisions beyond institutional constraints and commitments.

During the critical debates preceding the Sochi Games, considerable attention was paid to the deficient Russian record on democracy and human rights, not least the newly introduced harsh legislation on LGBT issues (Persson 2014), and also to the highly restrictive regulations forcing non-governmental organizations that received financial contributions from abroad to register as ‘foreign agents’ or else be forcibly shut down (Ostroukh 2012). Critics at home and abroad objected that this was not the proper time to have an Olympics mega-event hosted by Russia, and that the fact that the Games took place there could be construed as approval of the regime or even as a misplaced reward for misbehaviour. A year after the Olympics, the assassination of the oppositional politician Boris Nemtsov, ironically born in Sochi and a main critic of the Games and of Putin’s regime, corroborated misgivings that had been expressed about the inappropriateness of the location of the Games.

This was certainly not the first time that the pertinence of organizing mega-events in authoritarian settings became subject to international debate, neither was it likely to be the last one. In the Olympics context, similar voices were most recently heard before the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008 (Wettstein 2010), where the critical inquiry however ended soon after the Games were over. Unfortunately, media logics in general seem to dictate that once the Olympic Games as such are about to start, it is the reporting of the sport competitions that attract the media spotlight, and once the Games are concluded, critical discussions are done with too, as the attention gets shifted to the next mega-event to follow. This pattern shows exactly the way it should not be. When the hosting of Olympic Games has been awarded to a site in an authoritarian state, the global community has unquestionable moral responsibilities to live up to, in the decision phase as well as during the preparations, during, and after the Games.

Additionally, high-politics events in Europe made the Sochi Games stand out. The crisis in Ukraine and the violent domestic upheavals in Kyiv, culminating with the ouster of the president, reached a peak during the last week of the Games. The Russian response to the turn of events was heavy-handed, perhaps expectedly so as it took place in a neighboring country that Russians had historically come to regard as an integrated and taken-for-granted part of their own. Russia's annexation of Crimea, a part of sovereign Ukraine, was initiated during the final days of the Olympics. Despite the Russian unwillingness to officially admit to any intervention, Russian armed personnel and military equipment later on during the year supported rebels in the civil war in eastern Ukraine which by early fall of 2015 had reached an estimated death toll of 8 000 people.

The recent scandals involving FIFA with the revelation of murky financial double-dealing in connection with the decisions to let Russia in 2018, and Qatar in 2022, organize the FIFA World Cup, as well as the deep domestic crisis of legitimacy which in 2015 marred the Russian football industry following the resignation on corruption charges of the head of the Russian Football Union, Nikolay Tolstikh, brought further attention to the need for an incisive and critical scrutiny of how decisions are taken about selecting locations for mega-events in sports. Indeed, one logical and morally justifiable argument would be not to award such events to irreputable states with dubious democratic credentials in the first place.

However, one could of course argue that the hosting of such events should not be the privilege of an exclusive club of rich Western democracies only, and that the very location of mega-competitions in authoritarian states could lead to putting them under additional scrutiny, as well as engaging and locking them into a global exchange of ideas and impulses, thereby hopefully improving the condition of the population at large as well as supporting democratic aspirations within society. Such arguments cannot be dismissed out of hand, but if recognized, then resultant responsibility should be accepted by the international community, i.e. not to

turn away the critical gaze after the sports events have ended. Instead the international community should continue to support the local population and domestic reform agendas once the stadium lights have been put out. Failure on the part of the global community to raise its voice and criticize where criticism is due could indeed be considered as tantamount to silent complicity in human rights violations (Wettstein 2010).

It was exactly this theme about the need for a continued critical gaze that brought the authors of this special issue together, originally at a workshop at Malmö University, Sweden, in the spring of 2015 where most of them participated. For Sochi, as for sites of all major sports events, continued critical attention assessing political developments on the local, regional and central levels is warranted after the competitions are concluded. It is essential to try to gauge the extent to which predicted problems materialized, what happened afterwards, and what have been the more long-term consequences for the local population. This is also the rationale of this special issue. Thus united by their empirical focus on what happened to Sochi and Russia after the Olympics, the authors in this special issue contribute to theoretical perspectives such as mega-events in sports, sport and nationalism, ethnic politics, soft power, memory politics and diaspora politics. In brief, the substantive contents of the issue are the following.

Providing much of the general political context for the other contributions to the special issue, **Jonathan Grix and Nina Kramareva** explore the role mega-events such as the Sochi 2014 Winter Games and the forthcoming 2018 FIFA World Cup play in constructing a new Russian national identity. Modern Russia is faced with the problem of forming a viable national idea which is able to glue together a multi-ethnic state. The authors argue that the formulation of a national idea in Russia is yet to take place, and that the attempt to create one could lead to either ethnic exclusionism, with an inflated sense of patriotism, or civic liberalism with corresponding consequences for the country and the surrounding world. They

conclude that Russia's manifestation of soft power through the organization of sports mega-events is directed primarily at Russia's domestic audience, and that its main objective is to engender a viable national idea.

Following the line about the importance of the Sochi Olympics for Russia's identity-making, **Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk** claim that sports in Russia are susceptible to political constraints and are often generating sovereignty-centric discourses articulated through the concepts of exceptionality, nationalism and security. These influential discourses can be divided into three different categories. One would be a pre-Sochi narrative consolidated by the anticipation of symbolic revenge - Russia's return to great power status – and the glorification of Russia's power, might and grandeur. Secondly, a post-Sochi discourse has emerged out of militarization and the securitization of symbolic capital, trying to justify Russia's policy in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea. The third type of discourse is focused on the FIFA 2018 World Cup in Russia, which by way of contrast is treated more as a liability than as an asset or a source of national inspiration. The consequences of the contradictions brought by the latter discourse are hard to predict, the authors warn, and have to be studied further.

Taking a somewhat opposing perspective to the mainstream one with regards to the intentionality of Russian actions in connection with the crisis in Ukraine, **Ray Taras** argues, through the use of time-series analysis, that the Russian president Vladimir Putin, due to his widely recognized ardent sports mania, was so distracted by the sports events during the Olympic Games that he was inhibited from responding effectively to the accelerating crisis. The article thus contributes to the literature on crisis management by focusing on sport events as a major distraction. While many factors shaped the developments in Kyiv which resulted in the overthrow of the pro-Russian government and its replacement by a Western-oriented one, Taras argues that what he refers to as Putin's hubris played a major role.

Turning to the issue of the opposition against the Sochi Olympics undertaken by the indigenous people of Circassians – formerly inhabiting the Sochi region and now mostly found in other areas of the North Caucasus and in the diaspora – and the consequences this brought for them, **Bo Petersson & Karina Vamling** point out that the Circassian situation was paradoxical in the sense that whereas the group vehemently opposed the organization of the Winter Games in Sochi, the Games themselves signified an opportunity for them to make their voices heard internationally. This was quite simply their fifteen minutes of fame. The authors explore the extent to which the opposition against the organization of the Sochi Games helped to unite the Circassian movement, the degree to which the Russian authorities have acted against Circassian activists after the Olympics and whether or not the Circassians have managed to make their cause more widely known in global society.

The next article also deals with the Circassians, but from a slightly different angle. **Lars Funch Hansen** shows how the Circassians locally and transnationally used the Sochi Olympics to generate knowledge of the Circassian history in the region, which formerly was suppressed or manipulated by Soviet and Russian authorities. In the article cases of Circassian counter-use of history in connection with the Sochi Olympics are presented, and are argued to be instances of counter-branding based on local knowledge. The article thus illustrates how a mega sports event such as the Sochi Olympics can generate renewed space for the generation of knowledge, protest and counter-branding, and discusses how this relates to the wider processes of transnational Circassian revival.

The final article does not focus so much on what took place during the Olympic Games themselves or in their aftermath. Rather it focuses on why the mythical dog did not bark more than it did. **Johan Ekberg and Michael Strange** argue that in the build-up to the Sochi Olympics there was widespread anticipation that the Games would become dominated by dissent and political controversies rather than gold-winning performances. Yet, once the

Olympic torch was lit at the Opening Ceremony, fewer of those controversies ignited than expected. Through their use of International Relations (IR) theory, the authors present an innovative way of conducting research on Olympic Games. Applying this theoretical tool they conclude that the Sochi Olympics evidenced a tension between, on one hand, a rigorous process of political management by Russian state representatives, the organizing committee and the International Olympic Committee, and on the other the use of certain key norms to help ensure consent.

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