

Putin Scores Gold With Sochi Miracle

By [Sergei Markov](#)

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President Vladimir Putin won admiring looks from athletes and skeptical smirks from the international media when he fulfilled his dream of opening the Winter Olympics. The public debate over the Sochi Games compares only to the political battle that raged prior to the Summer Olympics in Moscow in 1980. But this is nothing unusual. Large countries always elicit strong emotions.

The main question in the debate about these Olympics has been whether Russia would be capable of hosting them. Putin has repeatedly said that his main objective in securing the hosting rights was to infuse optimism into a country that has endured three difficult decades starting with 1980s perestroika. Now Russians are in dire need of the drive born of victory and positive achievement. This also explains Russia's continued interest in World War II: Russians draw strength from that victory of 70 years ago to meet today's challenges. A great celebration awaits Russia in 2015, the anniversary of the Nazi defeat, and it will be at least as great as the Olympics in Sochi.

Putin cares about Russia's image, not in the eyes of the West but in the eyes of his own electorate. He wants to instill a sense of Russia's greatness in them, not in foreign observers.

Russia can and has made a great Winter Olympics. It can also create a modern and developed society and a high-tech economy. This is what motivates the intense criticism of the Sochi Games. Influential outsiders do not want to admit that Russia has overcome its domestic crises and is progressing along a path of development. They want to stop Russia.

Putin is well aware of this and was therefore prepared for a major campaign opposing the Games. But paradoxically, the groundless accusations leveled against the Olympics has only outraged Russians and reinforced their patriotism.

I think Putin also wanted to present Sochi, a beautiful little corner of Russia, as a gift to greater numbers of Russians. Putin has a personal residence in Sochi and visits often. He probably looked at the mountains and the sea and wondered what he could do to encourage Russians to vacation there instead of Turkey or the Alps. Now we have witnessed his brilliant response.

The anti-Sochi furor only serves to promote the city as a vacation destination. Scores of people around the world are probably already planning to visit Sochi to see what Putin did that was so controversial and why his enemies are in a fit over the Games. I personally visit Sochi many times every year. I love the Black Sea, and I take my students to the mountain gorges. It is wonderful to be able to share this great beauty with others.

Many observers claim that the construction of Olympic facilities was plagued with corruption. However, I think that Putin saw the Games as a way of minimizing corruption. The best way to reduce corruption is to allocate resources for a specific infrastructure project that comes with a built-in deadline. State agencies and the International Olympic Committee monitored the work, giving political importance to the project that frightened thieves into stealing less. I think that less money was stolen during the construction of the Games than is generally stolen during major projects. In any case, the authorities must build new roads and people will always steal. At least this time Putin found a clever way to reduce the losses.

The Olympics are also part of a plan to nationalize Russia's elite, those wealthy and influential people who complain that everything is terrible in Russia. After repeatedly calling on them to return, Putin has now built a Swiss-style mountain village in the Sochi hills with the implicit message: "Buy your villas and chalets right here at home."

As many observers have conceded, the Olympics opening ceremony was not just aesthetically pleasing but also ideologically significant. It was staged by Konstantin Ernst, head of Channel One state television and the creator of a television series in the 1990s that made a stylized version of the Soviet past part of mainstream culture during Putin's first two terms as president. The opening ceremony formulated a new understanding of Russian history and style.

The International Olympic Committee is raving about these Games, but has it become enamored of Putin? No, it is excited about something not immediately evident to the casual observer. These Olympics have created a new model for conducting the Games that the IOC can use frequently in the future. In the past, the IOC selected mountain resorts where 90 percent of the needed infrastructure for sports had been put in place over the course of many decades and only an additional 10 percent of investment was needed to host the Olympics.

For these Winter Olympics, Sochi had only 10 percent of the needed infrastructure but Moscow guaranteed the remaining 90 percent in direct investment. That meant not only that everything would be new and modern, but also that subcontractors would get plenty of work. All IOC members have long been lobbyists.

What's more, a new sports-oriented city would spring up where none existed before.

Putin convinced the IOC to choose Sochi by offering this promising new model, and not through bribes or other inducements. Now many other countries that have money but few sporting facilities can follow the example of Sochi. They will not offer pre-existing stadiums but ample budgets to the IOC.

Organizers have long wondered how the Winter Games could be held in a subtropical climate, and as it turned out, Russia proved to be the only viable location. Regarding the choice of location within Russia, Moscow and St. Petersburg have numerous hotels, but the mountains are far away. The Urals have mountains, but it is not a resort area and the hotels would go empty after the Games. Central Russia needs the sports stadiums, but the region lacks both hotels and mountains. The northern slopes of the Caucasus provide suitable mountains, but the region is unsafe. Sochi is the only spot that could host the Games and continue to bring income into the region. Incidentally, the 2018 Winter Olympics will be held at an even more southerly latitude, in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

The votes are in: Putin has scored a victory with Sochi.

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