

Georgia and the Sochi Olympic Games

By Molly Corso, Tbilisi

Abstract

The planned 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi are both an opportunity and a challenge for neighboring Georgia and the Caucasus region at large. The event offers a chance for the region to bask in the international limelight as the host for the world's athletes—for the first time since the 1980 Moscow Games. But security concerns, underscored by an uptick in terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus, and Russia's willingness to include contested Abkhazia in the Games' preparation, threaten to overshadow the event itself.

Olympic Dreams

Before Sochi won its bid for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in July 2007, Tbilisi had its eyes on Olympic Gold. President Mikheil Saakashvili backed an Olympic campaign, initiated by the late billionaire Badri Patarkatsishvili, for Borjomi-Bakuriani, a ski resort in Georgia.

The bid—far-fetched as it was—was based on Saakashvili's plan to use tourism as the foundation of Georgia's economy: Olympic Games are not always financial windfalls for countries, but hosting thousands of athletes and their fans was seen as a surefire way to bolster development in Tbilisi, Borjomi and Bakuriani—the three cities tagged in Georgia's application.

Borjomi's bid lost out, however, to Sochi—and Saakashvili initially welcomed Russia's success as a victory for the region: Sochi's application was only slightly more plausible than Borjomi's had been—both cities faced fierce competition from Austria, Spain and South Korea.

The upcoming Games were also—briefly—perceived as a chance to improve relations between Tbilisi and Moscow. In fact, despite Russia's 2006 embargo against Georgia, Saakashvili called Vladimir Putin to congratulate him personally, going so far as to say Georgia had supported Sochi's bid for the Games “from the very beginning,” according to media reports.

Saakashvili's exuberance for the Sochi Games was tempered, however, by concern Russia would use the Games—and their proximity to Abkhazia—to support the de-facto authorities in Sukhumi.

The Olympic-inspired bonhomie between Tbilisi and Moscow was short lived, however. A year after Sochi had won its bid, Russia and Georgia were entangled in a five-day war that ended with Moscow formally recognizing Abkhazia—Georgia's wayward territory that borders the future site of the 2014 Games. Despite the terms of the peace deal that ended the war, Russia did not remove its troops from Abkhazia, leaving a militarized bordering the Games.

The war was a turning point in Russo-Georgian relations—and Georgian support for the Sochi Olympics was one more victim in the fall-out between the two

countries. By October 2008, Saakashvili had flirted with the possibility of boycotting the Olympics, although that idea was quickly abandoned. Instead, Tbilisi downshifted to a policy of focusing international attention on Russia's ‘un-Olympic’ Sochi Games, particularly stressing Moscow's use of Abkhaz resources—land, people, infrastructure—to build its Olympic village and the ongoing controversy between the ethnic Circassian population that was nearly annihilated by Russia when it absorbed Sochi into the Russian Empire.

Terror in the North Caucasus—Past and Present

Tbilisi's strategy appears to hinge on two conflicts: the on-going frozen conflict with Abkhazia, a breakaway region with its own de-facto government since its bloody 1992–1993 bid for independence, and the Circassian genocide, a 19th century campaign by Tsarist Russia to annex Sochi and the surrounding territory.

By focusing on Russia's alleged use of illegal force, Georgia hoped to undermine Moscow's moral right to host the Games—an international symbol of peace and accord. It also hoped to underscore Russia's role as a regional bully and king maker, with invested interests in conflicts throughout the region from Abkhazia to Nagorno-Karabakh, not to mention Chechnya and Ingushetia.

While Moscow views the Sochi Olympics as a chance to flex its muscle in the North Caucasus, Tbilisi sees the Games as an indication of Russia's destructive role in the region.

One main point of contention for the Georgian government is Russia's use of Abkhazian labor, resources and infrastructure for the Sochi Games. Tbilisi considers these acts a direct violation of Georgian sovereignty and the embargo it has sought to enforce on the Abkhaz since it lost direct control of the territory nearly 20 years ago.

Abkhazia is just shy of 30 kilometers from the site of the 2014 Olympics, and potential Russian investments in Sukhumi's defunct airport—as well as ongoing projects to improve the road, rail and hospitality infra-

structure—have been welcomed by the de-facto government and its struggling economy. Real estate prices have increased, according to media reports, and the increased demand for cement and rock has bolstered employment.

For Georgia, however, that is all just another sign that Moscow is annexing Abkhazia. In February 2011, in comments to Georgia's Russian-language regional television station, PIK, Saakashvili lambasted the Russians for perpetuating strife and ethnic cleansing even as it prepares for the Olympic Games.

"As far as Russia's political problem is concerned [in respect to the Sochi Olympics], it is a huge problem, because just a few kilometers from the Olympic site Russia has officially on the political level legalized ethnic cleansing [in Abkhazia]," *Civil.ge* quoted him as saying. "In this sense they have problems, but this problem was not created by us. We would be happy if we could resolve this problem gradually through joint efforts with Russia."

Saakashvili's comments came as a response to comments from Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that indicated Georgia could pose a threat to the Olympic Games—a charge Saakashvili denied.

While Georgia is not a physical threat to the Olympics, it is working hard to undermine Russia's moral right to hold the Games. Georgian government officials and law makers have been pushing the cause of ethnic Circassians, a nation that was nearly annihilated by Tsarist Russia in the 19th century.

The Circassian cause is not influential locally, regionally or internationally, and the Circassian efforts to take ownership of the Games, or force Russian authorities to pay tribute to the memory of the Circassians who once lived in and around Sochi have been unsuccessful.

The Circassians were defeated by the Russian Army, and many were killed and forced into exile after a bloody battle that occurred on the site of the Sochi Olympics. Georgia became the first country to formally recognize the Circassian tragedy as a genocide in May, a legal act that added traction for Saakashvili's efforts to promote a "United Caucasus."

The movement is nebulous and vague—it is unclear, for example, how Georgia will be able to unite with the Abkhaz in light of the on-going conflict between Tbilisi and Sukhumi—but it highlights the deep-seated flaws in Russia's ambitions in the region. While Moscow perceives itself as a superpower with unquestionable jurisdiction over the Caucasus, Saakashvili has called for an alternative source of authority by working to create a united front out of the ethnic groups that populate the region.

Over the past year instability has been endemic in the Caucasus. In January, a terrorist attack shook

Domodedovo, a major airport in Moscow and, in February, terrorists killed three Russian tourists skiing near Sochi.

Stability and Security

The issue of security at the Sochi Games has become a troubling one for Russia and its immediate neighbors, including Georgia. While there are reports that Moscow is taking precautions to protect the Games' venues and future guests, rhetoric from Russian officials indicates that the Kremlin is prepared to blame Tbilisi for any problems that occur during the Olympics.

For Putin, the Games are a personal mission to showcase Russia's development and return as a major international power since he came to office in 2000. He drove the Sochi bid, and pledged the state would invest billions to turn the dilapidated Soviet-era resort into a world-class sporting venue.

But even as the Olympics have the potential to recast Russia—and the Caucasus—as a development success story—the Games are also perceived as a target for terrorists who are bent on bringing the Kremlin's wars in Chechnya and neighboring Dagestan and Ingushetia to Russian households.

The February attack on skiing tourists struck a nerve and subsequently Putin has been diligent about reinforcing his image as the man who can make the Olympics a success. In November he attended the 100th anniversary celebration of the Russian Olympic Committee, promising Sochi would deliver.

While security measures around the Olympic site are tight, according to media reports, the Russian authorities have done little to address long standing problems of poverty, corruption and inequality in the region.

In addition, the Abkhaz conflict is frozen but not settled. A similar conflict, between breakaway South Ossetia and Georgia, is further away but still close enough to cause concerns for Olympic organizers.

Against this backdrop, Georgia remains a scapegoat for Russian authorities as the Kremlin seeks to root out any threats to the Games. In August, the Russian National Counter-Terrorism Committee accused Tbilisi of supporting Islamic terrorists in the North Caucasus—a charge that the International Crisis Group reported has no real substance. The Georgian government has repeatedly denied any connection with terrorist groups in the North Caucasus or elsewhere.

The International Crisis Group warned in its 2011 report, however, that Russian authorities might be making occasional, unfounded accusations against Georgia to "prepare the ground" in case there is an attack or security problem at the Sochi Olympics.

Conclusion

The 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi should be a success for the Caucasus—an opportunity to showcase, on a global scale, the incredible potential of the region as a venue for international events and tourism.

For Georgia, the challenges of an Olympic event less than 50 miles from its own conflict with Abkhazia are coupled with the opportunities the Games provide for Tbilisi to emerge as a stable regional player.

Three years before the Games will be held, however, the turbulent mix of political ambition and failed pol-

icy in the North Caucasus is creating problems for Moscow—and the region—as it prepares for the Games.

Security issues and tense relations between Russia and Georgia, as well as other players, threaten to overshadow the Games and could present a serious threat to the event. On-going conflict in the region could undermine Russia's goal to cement its role as the dominant force in the North Caucasus.

About the Author

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