

Managing the Threat of an Olympics Boycott INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE AND RUSSIA'S RESPONSE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 290
September 2013

Sufian Zhemukhov
The George Washington University

As Russia's world-class athletes, culture, and economic development will be showcased at the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, its political direction and an array of unresolved issues will be exposed. No doubt, some foreign countries and NGOs are already trying to capitalize on the globalized nature of the Olympic Games to urge the Kremlin to come to terms with troublesome topics, from the Russian occupation of Georgian territories to LGBT rights and the scandal surrounding asylum-seeker Edward Snowden. What patterns have emerged in the Kremlin's responses to major issues and challenges? How will the Kremlin handle increasing domestic pressure and global scrutiny as the Games come closer?

After the 2008 War: A Case Study in Futility

Moscow enjoys a reputation as having a rather aggressive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. There have been many cases over the past two decades when Russia played on the weaknesses of its neighbors, using all kinds of instruments from trade sanctions to actual military invasion. But how does Moscow itself react to a neighbor's attempts at coercion? The case of the 2014 Olympics demonstrates that the Kremlin stands firm against such threats.

Russia faces many unresolved issues in the post-Soviet space, any of which could escalate rapidly during the short timeframe leading up to the Olympics. These include Russian diaspora problems in the Baltic states; political pressures in Moldova and breakaway Transnistria; Russian-Georgian relations in light of Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; managing relations with Baku and Yerevan; the U.S. military transit center in Kyrgyzstan; tension in Russian-Ukrainian relations; and new Eurasian customs union regulations. In fact, most post-Soviet states have a bone to pick with Russia and could use, say, a boycott of the Games as an instrument to try and pressure Moscow.

To date, however, political tensions between Russia and its neighbors remain disconnected from the Olympic spirit. Perhaps one of the most eloquent examples of this was when Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was the first to congratulate Vladimir Putin when Russia won its Olympic bid in 2007. Tbilisi's initial enthusiasm did not soften Moscow's position over Russian-Georgian relations, however. In spite of the fact that Sochi is very close to the Georgian border, Russia did not hesitate to declare war against Georgia in August 2008. Then, rubbing salt into the wound, the Kremlin recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, leading Tbilisi to use the Olympics as a platform to garner international attention in condemnation of Moscow's actions. Even with the support of some U.S. politicians, Georgia applied in vain to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in September 2008 requesting that the Games not be held in Sochi. Then, Tbilisi declared it would not send Georgian athletes to Sochi. It also boycotted the Women's World Chess Championship in Nalchik in 2008 (despite projections that the Georgians were the favorites to win). In another move, on May 2011, Georgia recognized as genocide Tsarist Russia's mass murder of Circassians in Sochi (the last capital of independent Circassia).

Initially, during a September 2008 press conference, one month after the August war, Putin formulated the Kremlin's uncompromising policy toward the challenge of an Olympic boycott, saying: "If they do it once, it will destroy the entire structure of the Olympic movement...However, on the other hand, if they want to take [the Sochi Games away], let them take on this burden." Indeed, neither the August 2008 war, nor the occupation of Georgian territory next to Sochi, nor the UN resolutions against Russia for years to come, nor the recognition of Sochi as a territory where genocide was committed—nothing has made the IOC change its decision to hold the Olympics in Sochi. This is not surprising. In the past, the IOC has tolerated bigger controversies: it did not move the 1980 Moscow Games in spite of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan and the ensuing mass boycotts, nor the 1984 Los Angeles Games, which was boycotted by the USSR and its allies.

The firmness with which the Kremlin addressed the Georgian challenge prevented similar challenges from other post-Soviet states that might have been tempted to exert the same kind of pressure in their complicated relations with Russia. It became obvious that it would not affect the Olympics if, say, Chisinau or Baku were to provoke the Russian military in Transnistria or Nagorno-Karabakh, or lead to any gains for Estonia if it also recognized the Circassian genocide.

In 2013, Tbilisi changed its position and announced that Georgia would not boycott the 2014 Olympics. The shift in Tbilisi's policy was the result of a change in government rather than the result of the Kremlin's firm policy. However, this is quite a remarkable example of how the same country tried to use the same political instrument three times, first supporting the Olympics in 2007, then deciding to boycott in 2008, and finally deciding to participate in 2013. Tbilisi's political inconstancy strikingly contrasts with Moscow's permanent line not to let its post-Soviet neighbors play the Olympic card.

Kremlin Policies with the West: Stopping Short of the Point of No Return

Russian policy toward Western states incorporates a much higher level of restraint and flexibility than Russia exhibits in its relations with post-Soviet states. Russian-British relations in recent years are an example of this kind of discontinuous rapport. For example, in 2006 there was high bilateral tension due to the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, but last year relations were stable even though the UK supported the Magnitsky list. Generally, Moscow rarely applies to the West the same wide range of consistently hard remedies it uses with post-Soviet states, namely economic sanctions and military threats. Nonetheless, when it comes to threats from Western states, Moscow enjoys the reputation of challenging them by applying so-called policies of “symmetric response.” That said, when it comes to such a sensitive issue like a possible boycott of the 2014 Olympics, the Kremlin seems to restrain itself even from “symmetric response,” choosing not to cross certain “red lines” or “points of no return” in the escalation of crises.

Russia’s policy towards the United States is less risk adverse than its approach to Europe, with the Kremlin edging very close to a point of no return. A series of confrontations brought the U.S. threat of Olympic boycott to the fore. The first U.S. boycott threat emerged in September 2008 as a reaction to the Russian-Georgian war, when U.S. Representatives Allyson Schwartz (D-PA) and Bill Shuster (R-PA), co-chairs of the House Georgia Caucus, introduced Congressional Resolution No. 412 (“No Russian Olympics in 2014”) calling on the IOC to strip Russia of the 2014 Winter Olympics and to find a more suitable alternative location.¹ At the time, however, the “reset” policy made the idea of a boycott politically irrelevant.

Between 2008 and 2013, there were no discussions in the U.S. of boycotting the Sochi Olympics. But, very recently, the threat of a U.S. boycott again emerged during the scandal connected with Edward Snowden. On July 16, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) suggested that the United States should boycott the Olympics if Russia granted Snowden asylum, but Graham found little support among his colleagues in Washington or more broadly within the American public. The senator’s position did not alarm the Kremlin because even the more popular 2008 initiative in the U.S. Congress to boycott the Olympics had no consequences. However, public opinion shifted as the Snowden controversy dragged on and even moreso as Russia’s restrictive laws regarding sexual minorities attracted greater attention. The Kremlin miscalculated the White House’s outlook when instead of relieving Russia-U.S. tensions from converging controversies, it escalated it by granting Snowden asylum. President Barack Obama responded by cancelling his planned meeting with Putin and for the first time referenced an Olympic boycott. Even though Obama announced his personal position as against the boycott, the very fact that he referenced it demonstrated that the Kremlin was at its point of no return.

¹ [https://schwartz.house.gov/press-release/memberseeeeeeno-russian-olympics-2014"-resolution#.UhfMuCPdBs](https://schwartz.house.gov/press-release/memberseeeeeeno-russian-olympics-2014)

Feeling this, the Kremlin went silent and did not further escalate bilateral tensions. According to the Kremlin's "symmetric response" policy, one would expect Putin to do something in response to the cancellation of the presidents' meeting and "cancel" something in response. However, Moscow preferred not to escalate tensions with the United States. At its red line, the Kremlin did not cancel the 2013 meeting between the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense, John Kerry and Chuck Hagel, and the Russian Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense, Sergey Lavrov and Sergey Shoigu, which the U.S. Department of State then framed as generally productive.

On the social level, after the Russian parliament adopted laws against sexual minorities in Russia, the LGBT community and social activists in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere made anti-Olympic statements to which the Kremlin quickly responded with a statement assuring that there will be no persecution of LGBT athletes during the 2014 Olympics. European politicians also distanced themselves from any anti-Olympic activists. The Russian parliament that had been very active in adopting anti-gay laws abruptly became quiet. Though they did not go so far as to undo the laws, Russian officials explained that these laws were not against the LGBT community, but against propaganda of so-called "untraditional sex," trying to show that there was some fine line there that had not been crossed. In their statements and interviews, many Russian officials, including Putin, were quick to assure the international community that there would be no danger to gay athletes during the Games. In an interview with the Associated Press in September 2013, Putin, for the first time, expressed his readiness to meet with representatives of LGBT community, which many experts interpreted as caused by the pressure of LGBT athletes and community in the West.

Conclusion

The 2014 Sochi Olympics can be treated as diplomatic capital. Such a tool may be used even multiple times, as Georgia did when it announced in 2008 its intentions to boycott the Olympics and later in 2013 when it used the Games to restore relations with Russia. The Kremlin, for its part, is hostage to the Olympics, as it deals with challenges that may lead to negative publicity or boycotts. With lasting tensions and new unexpected challenges, Russia has several times come close to provoking different countries to boycott the Games. So far it has navigated this uphill course, with a firm hand toward neighbors like Georgia and more flexibility with the West. It would be sensational if a country does boycott the Games, an outcome Moscow seeks to avoid. But, truth be told, even if a boycott took place, it will not be a fatal blow to the Kremlin, and the Games will go on.

**Elliott School of
International Affairs**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
E U R A S I A ● TO RESEARCH AND
● SECURITY IN EURASIA

© PONARS Eurasia 2013. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of academics that advances new policy approaches to research and security in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible by grants from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. www.ponarseurasia.org