

Tensions mount between US and Russia in lead-up to Olympics

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27 January 2014

The Sochi Olympics, which begin on February 6, take place in an atmosphere of escalating geopolitical tensions. The US government and the Western media are working to turn the event into a humiliation for the Russian government, amid growing conflicts between Washington and Moscow in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Athletes from hundreds of countries and tens of thousands of spectators will arrive in the Russian resort town to find an armed camp. Forty thousand security officers will patrol the so-called “ring of steel” set up by the Kremlin around the venue. They will be backed up by an air defense system, gunboats in the Black Sea, and 70,000 troops stationed along Russia's nearby southern border with Georgia.

Four hundred Cossacks, the recently-resuscitated tsarist-era imperial gendarmes notorious for their savage violence, have been brought in and charged with checking identification and rounding up suspects. Restrictions on demonstrations, protests, and public gatherings have been in place since early January, as well as controls over vehicle movement in, out, and around the Olympic zone.

Since the collapse of the USSR, Moscow has waged repeated wars and bloody counterinsurgency operations in the North Caucasus, the region neighboring Sochi, to crush Islamist separatist movements. Islamist jihadist groups have proclaimed Sochi a target.

Last week, a group called Vilayat Dagestan, which claimed responsibility for a December 2013 bombing in Volgograd, Russia that killed 34 people, issued a statement warning that Russians will “not see a quiet life.” They promised to deliver a “present” to tourists attending the games. In recent days, five European countries also allegedly received threatening letters.

Washington and its Saudi allies bear central

responsibility for the risk of terrorist atrocities at the Sochi games. Jihadists from Chechnya and Dagestan are currently fighting alongside other US-backed Islamist extremists in Syria, where they are receiving critical training and funding.

Washington has long backed Islamist groups in the strategic North Caucasus region of Russia as part of its rivalry with Moscow in Central Asia. It has pursued this policy despite instances of terrorist “blowback” such as last year’s Boston Marathon bombings by two youths who had ties to Caucasus Islamist groups and whose uncle, Ruslan Tsarni, had ties to US intelligence.

Meeting with Putin last August, Prince Bandar—the spy chief of Saudi Arabia, which supports Islamist groups in the North Caucasus—warned the Russian leader that Saudi Arabia would only guarantee the safety of the Olympic Games if Moscow dropped its support for the Assad regime in Syria.

The media silence on the links between US foreign policy and terror groups in the region underlines the hypocrisy of the US media’s hyping of terror dangers and of concerns that Moscow is incapable of safeguarding the games.

Thus *Washington Post* columnist Sally Jenkins writes, “The Olympics aren’t supposed to kill people. They’re supposed to exalt them. But it’s too late to take the dangerous, despoiling Winter Games away from the thugocracy that is Vladimir Putin’s Russian regime.”

The atmosphere of political provocation around the Sochi Olympics found expression in comments by the speaker of the US House of Representatives, John Boehner. On the Jay Leno Show, Boehner bluntly denounced Russian President Vladimir Putin as a “thug” and demanded that Obama adopt more confrontational policies against Moscow to “better

protect America's interests and our allies, especially in Eastern Europe."

American athletes have been told not to wear any identifying clothing outside of game venues. There are widespread English-language reports on Moscow's search for "black widows"—female suicide bombers—dispatched to Sochi.

The US State Department continues to issue updated alerts to US citizens traveling to the region. In a move apparently made without first securing the agreement of the Russian government, the US Navy dispatched two warships to the Black Sea, purportedly to rescue US citizens in the event of an emergency.

On Friday, the Canadian government advised its citizens to rethink their plans to attend.

The Kremlin, which intended for the games to symbolize Russia's resurgence as a world power, has responded by rejecting criticisms of its handling of the terror threat. Last week, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev insisted to CNN that the danger to the Sochi Olympics is no greater than that which faced previous games.

Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, told the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*: "Some countries act totally unscrupulously and arrogantly, trying to politically discredit our Olympics in Sochi."

The media campaign being whipped up around the security of the Olympic Games is part of an ongoing effort by the US and allied governments to sabotage the games and eliminate whatever prestige Russia might have obtained by hosting them.

Last year, the White House used reactionary laws recently passed in Russia that stigmatize gays and ban the promotion of homosexuality to encourage a torrent of "human rights" criticism of Moscow. Such criticisms, given the right-wing character of the Islamist forces Washington itself is backing in the region, are deeply hypocritical.

In December, President Obama named openly gay representatives to the US Olympic delegation in an effort to further promote the issue.

The US is allied with the European powers, in particular Germany, in cynically manipulating the issue of homosexual rights at the games. Germany's athletes will wear rainbow-colored uniforms, evoking a widely recognized symbol of the gay pride movement.

While the US has rejected calls for an official boycott

of the event, the US president, first lady, and the vice president all declined to attend the games—the first time since 2000 that this has happened.

In December, the president of Germany, a country which is actively promoting an anti-Russian opposition movement in Ukraine that threatens to split the country in half, said he would not attend the Olympics in order to protest Russia's human rights abuses and "air of imperialism."

The immense cost of the Sochi Olympics, now exceeding \$50 billion—more than four times the original estimate and the most expensive in Olympic history—is also being cited in the ongoing media campaign. According to Kremlin critics, as much as \$30 billion of that sum was embezzled by well-connected government insiders.

It would hardly be surprising, given the deep corruption of the parasitic ruling elite that emerged from the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, that it could have used the Olympics as yet another opportunity to transfer huge amounts of state wealth to the super-rich.

In this respect, however, the Sochi Olympics differs from other games only in terms of the scale of the graft. Responding to the allegations of corruption in May, Jean-Claude Killy, head of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) commission for the Sochi games, observed: "I don't recall an Olympics without corruption."

Scandals have mired the games for decades, with bribery being a feature of every event, as cities vie to serve as hosts so that business interests in their regions can win massive, lucrative contracts.

Investigations into the 1996 games in Atlanta and the Salt Lake City games in 2002 both turned up evidence of widespread corruption on the part of both the host cities and the IOC. *The author also recommends: Saudi-Russian talks raise questions on Syrian war drive, Boston bombings* [11 September 2013]



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