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1-15-2014

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Recommended Citation

Hayes, Nicholas. 2014. "Putin playing Olympic games with centuries-old ethnic conflicts" *MinnPost*, January 15, 2014. <https://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2014/01/putin-playing-olympic-games-centuries-old-ethnic-conflicts>.

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MINNPOST

Putin playing Olympic games with centuries-old ethnic conflicts

By Nick Hayes | 01/15/14



REUTERS/RIA Novosti

Putin's visit to Sochi was part of a quick media blitz in the wake of the terrorist attack in Volgograd to deflect unwelcome speculation about security at the Sochi games and to wrap up what has been his most successful PR campaign in years.

Russian President Vladimir Putin started the New Year by putting his spin on the media's appetite for stories on Islamic terrorism in Russia and issues of security at the Sochi Winter Olympics. Drawing from his bag of media tricks, he picked his favorite ploy: he showcased himself.

He **visited Sochi** the first week of January to inspect the facilities and feed the media with puff pieces of a robust 61-year-old Russian President who was swift on ice and "schussed" with the best downhill. He and his Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev skied down the slopes in the nearby mountains at Krasnaya Polyana, a ski resort adjacent to the official Olympic downhill ski venue. He also played a game of hockey in one of the Olympiad rinks. Putin, by the way, typically plays at least one hockey game a year before the cameras and eyes of the Russian media. This game in Sochi was a bit of an old

timers' game that included a few famous but retired Russian hockey stars. Any player on the opposing team who just might have a mean slap shot probably did his best to hold it back. Putin's team won 12-3.



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Putin's visit to Sochi was part of a quick media blitz in the wake of the terrorist attack in Volgograd to deflect unwelcome speculation about security at the Sochi games and to wrap up what has been his most successful PR campaign in years. In Sochi, he announced a lifting of the ban on protests during the games. The gesture continued his recent efforts on the eve of the Sochi Olympics to promote an image of a "normal" and democratic Russia with a president who was more interested in granting pardons to than in arresting his opponents.

The PR campaign started with the release from Siberian prison of one-time oil baron Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky, two of the members of Pussy Riot and 30 detained Greenpeace activists. All three cases have one element in common. They are of far greater interest to public opinion in the West than inside Russia. No wonder [Huffington Post](#) named Putin the "2013 Public Relations Man of the Year." The [London Times](#) named him "International Person of the Year 2013."

Putin hubris

Historians, however, might someday describe the hubris of Putin skiing in Sochi on one of the most volatile "fault lines" in modern history. The line extends eastward across the northern Caucasus region from Dagestan on the western shore of the Caspian Sea to Sochi on the eastern shore of the Black Sea. The Russian conquest of the region started in the early 1800s and culminated in its brutal occupation of Sochi in 1864. An ill-omened irony of history, the Sochi Winter Olympics coincides with the 150 anniversary of the Russian conquest of the city, the last stand of the indigenous Caucasian resistance.

The significance of this coincidence was not lost on Dokku Umarov, the self-styled emir of the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus and the prime suspect responsible for planning the recent terrorism in Volgograd. Last July, Umarov declared a new wave of terrorism across Russia and **promised to avenge** "the bones of thousands of our Muslim ancestors who were killed and buried along the Black Sea coast."

MinnPost readers may remember that Umarov may have had a hand in or **inspired the Tsarnaev brothers** in plotting and executing the Boston Marathon bombing. Umarov does not have to strike Sochi to spoil "Putin's Games." There are any number of vulnerable targets across the rebellious

northern Caucasus that he could ignite and deflect the world media's attention away from Putin's "Potemkin Village" in Sochi and towards his hard political realities spread out along Russia's southern frontier.

Yet, there remains an air of clueless denial in the Kremlin's approach to the Olympics. As I am writing this piece, today's news lead on the [official website](#) of the Sochi Winter Olympics announces that sales for merchandise with the official Sochi Olympic logo has set a new record. The report carries this interesting anecdote on candy sales: "If placed side by side, 220 km of marmalade candy with the Sochi 2014 logo has been sold, approximately one third of the distance from Moscow to St. Petersburg."

Another Olympic site

Had Putin sought my advice before he pushed so hard for the Winter Olympics at Sochi, I would have told him to visit another Olympic site. Thirty years ago, the now defunct state of Yugoslavia hosted the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics. Last November, Reuters photographer Dada Ruvic [documented the ruins](#) of the complex for those games. In less than a decade after 1984, the winter and summer Olympic sites served as either artillery targets or platforms for shelling the city. Since the end of the Bosnian War in 1995, graffiti artists and malign neglect have completed the devastation of the facilities. In the main stadium located in the heart of the Sarajevo, broken down and empty rows of seats look down on a playing field now populated with the markers of Islamic graves.

Sochi, of course, is not Sarajevo and the lesson here is not a prediction of genocide. The lesson is that heads of state should be wary of making the site of centuries-old ethnic conflicts into an international showplace, especially when those conflicts are heating up in the hills and mountains nearby.

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