

THE GEOPOLITICS OF SOCHI

By Michael A. Reynolds



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The founder of the International Olympic Committee, Pierre de Coubertin, had a vision that athletic competitions would attenuate geopolitical ones. Sport, he believed, could cut across cultures and thereby foster amity in the international realm. Accordingly, he worked for the revival of the athletic competitions of the ancient Greeks: the Olympic Games. To popularize the modern version of those games and build an intercontinental following, he championed the rotation of the games among different national hosts every four years. Today, as de Coubertin might have wished, the Olympic movement is a truly global phenomenon. Nations around the world strive to burnish their reputations through participating in the games, winning medals at them, and, above all, by hosting the games. When holding the games on its soil, a country takes the world stage to showcase itself.

Yet de Coubertin's vision has been realized only partway. While the Olympic Games do generate goodwill and international good-feeling, they also occasionally aggravate international tensions by serving as a platform upon which countries play out rivalries and indulge their vanity, reveal their insecurities, and expose their grudges, as the 1936, 1972, 1980, and 1984 games illustrate. The Frenchman's aspirations notwithstanding, the games sometimes exacerbate rather than ameliorate animosity.

The 2014 Winter Olympics, too, may well deepen international acrimony, and do so to the detriment of United States foreign policy. The 22nd Winter Games will take place next month in the picturesque port of Sochi. A resort town on the Black Sea blessed with a subtropical climate and the presence of alpine mountains just thirty-seven miles outside the city, Sochi would seem a superb location for a winter sporting event. In addition, the games have the express and enthusiastic backing of the host country's head of state.

THE OLYMPICS: POWER, PRESTIGE, AND NOSTALGIA

To host the Olympics is always regarded as an honor. It provides a country the chance to put the world's spotlight on itself. The Sochi Olympics, however, carry a deeper significance for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin ascended to the prime ministry in 1999 and the presidency in 2000. These games will, he hopes, showcase not

simply his country today, but more importantly its recovery under his leadership from the disastrous decade of political disarray and economic chaos that followed the Soviet collapse of 1991.

It is important to remember that in 1980, just barely a decade before the USSR unraveled, Moscow had hosted the Summer Olympics. Soviet citizens, even at the time, saw those games as a special moment in the history of their state. The USSR already by 1956 had established itself as a leader, if not the leader, in the Olympics and in international sport in general, but it was the arrival of the Olympics games to Moscow heralded the arrival of the USSR. The 1980 games signaled that the world saw the USSR not merely as a fearsome geopolitical and technological power but a cultural actor as well. The U.S.-led boycott of the 1980 Olympics therefore did sting Soviet sensitivities, but even that slap in the face could not erase the sense of achievement that Soviet citizenry took in hosting teams from eighty nations from around the globe. The Moscow games were a source of genuine pride for Soviets of Putin's generation.

Putin thus badly wanted to bring the 2014 Olympics to Russia. He lobbied the International Olympic Committee hard, and even traveled to Guatemala to make the case in person, speaking first in English and then in French – rare and unprecedented acts for him respectively. The IOC's selection in 2007 of Sochi as the site of the 22nd Winter Games thus offered Putin a tantalizing opportunity: What cleaner way to demonstrate to domestic and global audiences alike his success in returning Russia as a world actor than to stage another Olympics?

Sochi's geography adds another layer. Sochi lies in the North Caucasus and is just three hundred miles from Chechnya, the place where local rebels' defeat of Russian Federal Forces in 1996 marked the nadir of Russia's decline. Putin's signature domestic accomplishment – if also perhaps his most tenuous – has been the pacification of Chechnya. Sochi is also only about twenty miles from Abkhazia, a territory that effectively broke from Georgia in 1993 after a civil war. Russia recognizes Abkhazia as an independent and sovereign state. Only the comical entourage of Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Tuvalu concur in that opinion. The United States, and every other state regard Abkhazia as part of sovereign Georgia. Russia's rout of Georgia in the war of August 2008, however, not only shattered any possibility of resolving the dispute in Georgia's favor, but also delivered a stinging and embarrassing defeat to American policy in the region. Washington had loudly and proudly touted Georgia as a beacon of democracy and possible candidate for NATO, but when push came to shove, America did not do much beyond airlifting Georgian troops deployed to Iraq back home.

Although Putin's popularity has fallen from its peak in the wake of the war with Georgia and Russia's oil boom, it has stabilized and remains solid. According to polling by the independent Levada Center, as of December 2013, roughly two out of three Russian citizens approve of Putin's performance. A successful Olympics would forever remain a triumph of his, a capstone achievement that would bolster his legitimacy for some time. To ensure the games are successful, Putin has overseen expenditures that have reportedly risen to over \$50 billion, a sum more than seven times greater than the cost of the 2010 Vancouver games.

The need to vastly – and quickly – expand Sochi's limited infrastructure explains much of this enormous bill, but kickbacks account for a significant portion as well. Despite his rhetoric in the early years of his presidency promising a more disciplined and cleaner government, corruption has become a hallmark of Putin's Russia. Putin is today seen less as a foe of corruption than an enabler.

Meanwhile, the starkly illiberal nature of his regime has alienated many. His domestic and foreign critics have predictably subjected the preparations to a steady stream of negative commentary. They have highlighted cost overruns, pointed to delays in construction, bemoaned the rampant bribery, and predicted logistical difficulties and failures of various sorts.

In the U.S., conversations about the Sochi Olympics have been dominated by discussion of Russia's decision last June to outlaw “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” to children. Despite the fact that the upper and lower houses of Russia's parliament passed the ban with votes of 137 to 0 and 436 to 0 respectively, critics of Putin have been all too happy to make him, and his Olympics, the focus of their outrage. Pundits have mooted threats of boycott and protests. For his part, President Obama announced he will avoid Sochi and demonstratively appointed openly gay athletes to the U.S. delegation to the games. Among those appointed is sports legend and lesbian icon, Billie Jean King. King aspires to be Obama's “big gay middle finger” to Putin.

The zeal of King and other Americans to use the Sochi Olympics to stick it to Putin may be understandable, but as the suicide bombings of the train station and trolleybus in the city of Volgograd should remind us, Putin's image is not the sole matter at stake in Sochi. And what is his loss or embarrassment is not necessarily America's gain. Russia faces a terror problem that is real, chronic, and complex, and that consists of international and global dimensions that touch American interests outside even the vast territory of post-Soviet Eurasia.

REAL, CHRONIC, AND COMPLEX: RUSSIA' TERROR PROBLEM

On 21 October, and then again on 29 and 30 December, suicide bombers in the city of Volgograd struck consecutively a minibus, trolleybus, and the train station. At last count, the bombings took the lives of 41 people and injured well over one hundred. On 19 January, two young men in their twenties named Suleiman and Abdurrahman from Russia's Dagestan Republic posted a forty-nine minute long video on the internet. The video opens with a *nasheed*, a genre of anthem sung *acapella* on themes of jihad and martyrdom. The *nasheed* became a hallmark of jihadists during the Afghan war against the Soviets. It is now a favorite in videos of radical Islamists, often accompanying footage of combat against Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whereas *nasheeds* are usually sung in Arabic, this one is in Russian, albeit on the themes of martyrdom in jihad and its promises of the washing away of sin and life in the hereafter with sweet wine and tasty fruits even as those on the earth call the martyr a terrorist. Footage of two hands preparing a home-made bomb makes vivid the theme.

Claiming to represent an organization called *Ansar al-Sunnah*, Suleiman and Abdurrahman take credit for the attacks. Addressing the Russian people, they warn that unless Russia withdraws from the Caucasus, more attacks will follow. "Putin," they taunt, "promised you victory, but what has he achieved? By the mercy of Allah, that war caused jihad to spread throughout the Caucasus. And now we will spread it across the full territory of Russia!"

By itself, the video is not conclusive. But well before its appearance multiple signs suggested the Volgograd bombings were carried out by an organization, most likely made up of jihadis based in the Caucasus. A string of suicide bombings is not easy to orchestrate. Building an explosive device in itself is not a simple matter, but preparing an individual to destroy him or herself is a truly formidable task. Willful self-annihilation runs against every human instinct. The recruitment, screening, cultivation, and manipulation of suicide bombers demands a fine grasp of human psychology. Moreover, the process is logistically complex, as it demands time and careful control of the environment. Yet in the space of less than three months, three suicide bombings, two back-to-back, struck Volgograd, a relatively peaceful city of about a million notable only for its former name of Stalingrad and role as a site of a titanic battle in World War II. Notably, all three attacks struck public transportation – a target ideal for indiscriminate killing and maiming and thereby for sowing fear. Similarities in the explosives employed further suggest that the attacks are related.

Lastly, all three bombers were tied to jihadist groups in the North Caucasus. Jihadists have been operating there for nearly two decades. Typically, commentators explain the presence of jihadists in the North Caucasus by pointing to the wars in Chechnya of 1994-1996 and 1999-2009. They argue that the indiscriminate brutality of the Russian Federal forces radicalized many Chechens and drove them to perform acts of terror, including suicide bombings. There is much to support this thesis. Following the outbreak of the Second Chechen War, where Putin expressly sanctioned the use of disproportionate and indiscriminate force, a wave of suicide bombings struck military and civilian targets inside Chechnya and then later in Russia, including Moscow. Many of these women were distraught widows or relatives of slain Chechens, who sought vengeance for the horrors inflicted on those close to them. The trope of the "Black Widow" became a fixture of the Second Chechen War.

Later research revealed that the "Black Widow" phenomenon was not as spontaneous as originally portrayed. Networks existed to identify, cultivate, and indoctrinate distraught women, which is not to say, however, that the human desire to avenge loved ones was not a central motive.

Even as Western analysts emphasized the self-defeating aspects of Russia's harsh tactics in Chechnya and predicted only the further radicalization of the Chechen population, Moscow and its local Chechen allies slowly but steadily pacified Chechnya. By backing local Chechens – first the Chechen mufti, Akhmad Kadyrov, who saw the jihadis and their primitive interpretation of Salafi Islam as a greater threat to Chechen society than Russia, and then Kadyrov's son, Ramzan, after the former's assassination – Putin gave Chechens an honorable alternative to capitulation or death. Gradually the rebel movement dwindled as rebels defected, leaving a hard but small core of

ideologically committed jihadists. Moscow's financial and material support of Ramzan has certainly not brought the republic a just or open political order, but it has fostered comparative stability and development. The once-flattened capital city of Grozny had been entirely built anew, complete with skyscrapers, tree-lined parks, and one of Europe's largest mosques. Local Chechen forces handle security, and jihadist attacks are small scale and relatively rare.

Undermining this qualified success in Chechnya, however, has been the diffusion of the jihadist movement across the North Caucasus and even beyond. Radical Islam in Russia, which was once largely parasitic on Chechen alienation, is no longer the preserve of the Chechens.

THE BOMBERS: DIVERSITY IN DESTRUCTION

The attacks in Volgograd bear witness to this troubling development. All three were either known jihadists or related directly to known jihadists. Yet none of the bombers were Chechens or directly linked to the Chechen cause. The October bomber was a thirty-year old Muslim woman, Naida Asiyalova, from the Dagestani town of Buinaksk. While studying in Moscow, she met and married through common-law an ethnic Russian from Kranoyarsk, Siberia, Dmitri Sokolov, who converted to Islam. In 2012, the couple joined jihadist circles in Dagestan. Sokolov, who was wanted for participating in two terror attacks in Dagestan, reportedly built the explosive belt that Asiyalova detonated when she boarded a municipal bus in Volgograd. A few weeks later, Dagestani law enforcement found and killed Sokolov and four others in an early morning firefight outside the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala.

The perpetrator of the 29 November bombing of the Volgograd train station was another ethnic Russian, Pavel Pechenkin. Born and raised in the central Russian republic of Marii El, the soft-spoken and introverted Pechenkin worked as an ambulance attendant in the nearby city of Kazan. For reasons unknown to his co-workers, he converted to Islam in January 2012 and later that spring, joined an underground jihadist group based in Buinaksk, Dagestan (known prior to the Soviet era as "Temir Khan Shura"). His parents, heartsick over their son's turn toward jihadism, traveled to Dagestan in September of that year to find him. They were unsuccessful. Out of desperation, they issued a video appeal to him, begging him to recognize that violence and religious faith are incompatible and imploring him to return home.

Penchenkin answered his parents with a video of his own that was posted to YouTube. The video is striking for Penchenkin's softly spoken but blunt message. Speaking now as "Mujahid Ansar al-Rusi" of the Temir Khan Shura¹ *jamaat* (congregation) and sitting with a banner proclaiming the Muslim declaration of faith behind him, Penchenkin rejects his parents' request to return home and refutes their claim that faith and violence are incompatible. To the contrary, he asserts, Islam requires violence and killing, and he affirms his resolve to become a martyr for Islam several times. Notable, too, is that the video was not a self-production, but was produced and distributed under the aegis of *Vilayat Dagestan*, the "Province of Dagestan" of the Caucasus Emirate, the same outfit that released the video of Suleiman and Abdurrahman.

The third Volgograd bomber was a twenty-six year-old woman named Aksana [sic] Aslanova. Although born in Turkmenistan, she was of Tabasaran ethnicity and later moved with her family to the city of Derbent in the south of Dagestan, the native land of the Tabasaran people. In Derbent she studied at a local branch of the Dagestani State Pedagogical University.

Aslanova married two or perhaps even three times. Her first husband, Mansur Velibekov, was a member of the "southern sector of the Dagestani front" of the Caucasus Emirate. Dagestani security killed Velibekov and his brother in July 2008 during an attempt to capture him. Other sources maintain that Aslanova then married another underground Dagestani jihadist commander, Israpil Valizhdanov. Born not far from Derbent, Valizhdanov joined a jihadi training camp in Chechnya in the late 1990s and fought there before returning to southern Dagestan to lead an underground militant unit. Known for his tactical proficiency, Valizhdanov was nonetheless struck down by Dagestani security forces in a nighttime operation in April 2011. The following year Aslanova herself "went into the forest," i.e. took up arms with the jihadist underground and cut ties to her parents and relatives. She reportedly became the "sharia" wife of Gasan Abdullaev, the head of the militant formation. Abdullaev is the suspected organizer of a plot in 2011 to bomb a Moscow-St. Petersburg passenger train and is wanted for arms smuggling and attacks on several police officers among other crimes.

¹ Temir Khan Shura was the pre-Soviet name of Buinaksk.

JIHADISM IN THE CAUCASUS

Islamist terror in Russia had its beginnings in the war in Chechnya in 1994-96. Jihadists from around the Arab world, Afghanistan, and elsewhere rallied to the Chechen side. They brought not only their arms and expertise but also their agenda to convert Chechnya into a base for international jihad. The jihadists used the peace that followed the Russo-Chechen truce of 1996 as an opportunity to build camps and recruit new followers, such as the aforementioned Valizhdanov, to prepare to export jihad to the rest of the region and beyond. Their invasion of neighboring Dagestan precipitated the second Chechen War in 1999 propelled the relatively unknown Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency by the year's end. Crushing the Chechen and jihadist forces and restoring Moscow's authority throughout the Russian federation were President Putin's *raison d'être*. The former KGB colonel gave free rein to the federal forces to employ overwhelming force.

Chechen rebels responded in two ways. Some laid down arms or switched to the Federal side, a choice made vastly easier by Moscow's embrace of Akhmad Kadyrov, a prominent Chechen religious figure who saw the jihadis and their interpretation of Islam as the greatest threat to the Chechen people. Others aligned with the jihadis. As the federal forces pressed the rebels, the latter grew increasingly desperate and radical. They turned to terror tactics, sending suicide bombers, often Chechen females, to attack military and civil targets first inside Chechnya in 2000 and then elsewhere in the Russian Federation beginning in 2003. Most famously, they held hostage a full theater in Moscow in 2002 and then, most horrifically, did the same to a school in Beslan, Ossetia.

Since many of the perpetrators were women who had lost husbands or male relatives, these so-called "Black Widow" terror attacks were understood largely as despairing responses to Russian state terror and violence. There is no doubt that the cruelty of the Federal forces provoked rage, but it is important to note that the targets of the attacks were selected thoughtfully. The choice of a Moscow theater showing a favored play of Soviet-era children and the merciless decision to attack an elementary school in Ossetia on September 1, the first day of school and what is effectively a grand national ritual celebration of childhood were not coincidental but aimed instead to magnify the emotional impact of a terror strike against the most innocent and vulnerable. The proliferation of Islamist terror attacks was never simply a reaction to Russian excesses; it has also been the product of a deliberate strategic calculus by jihadis in the Caucasus. Chechen rebels in 1995 had changed the course of the first Chechen war when they seized hostages from a Russian hospital in 1995 and thereby forced Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to agree to a ceasefire.

The spectacular and horrific terror attacks of the 2000s were clearly intended to replicate such success. In the context of Putin's resolve and a Russian public far less sympathetic to the Chechen cause, however, they failed to reverse the tide of the struggle. Before the end of 2000, Federal forces had taken control of Chechnya's major population centers, and by 2009 together with their local Chechen allies they had ground down the opposition inside Chechnya so successfully that Moscow declared its "counter-terrorism" operation over.

The ranks of jihadis inside Chechnya have dwindled. Nonetheless, they have refused to concede defeat. To the contrary, they now grandly called themselves the "Caucasus Emirate" in open expression of their ambition to unify the Caucasus under Islamic law as part of a revived global Caliphate. They relegated Chechnya to the status of a "vilayat," or province, one among several in the virtual Emirate. They continued to mount sporadic attacks on targets throughout the North Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia, including Moscow's subway system.

Today the leader of the Caucasus Emirate is a forty-nine-year-old Chechen named Doku Umarov. Umarov is a dour and uncharismatic but dogged figure who has acted as the Emirate's emir, or commander-in-chief for over six years. His death has been reported several times, most recently on 16 January 2013, but has never been confirmed. Umarov fought in the first Chechen war and from the start aligned himself with the most radical rebels. After attrition had claimed the better known fighters, Umarov emerged as the chief jihadist in 2006. Despite the fact that their presence inside Chechnya was tenuous, Umarov in 2007 declared the creation of the Caucasus Emirate with himself as emir. After a string of suicide attacks in 2010 that struck targets in Moscow, Stavropol, and Kiziliar for which Umarov took credit, the U.S. State Department placed him on its list of global terrorists.

Despite Umarov's success in mounting attacks on trains, concert halls, and urban transport, his emirate has failed to rattle Moscow. Umarov recognizes that the Sochi Olympics, however, offer him an incomparable platform on which to demonstrate the Emirate's resiliency and humiliate Putin. Thus in a video posted to the internet this past

summer, Umarov declared that he was breaking an earlier moratorium on attacks. The Kremlin, he said, had wrongly interpreted this gesture as a sign of weakness and now planned to hold the “satanic” Olympic games “on the bones of our ancestors, on the bones of many, many dead Muslims buried on our land by the Black Sea.” He now called upon the *mujahidin* to use maximal force to stop the games.

Umarov’s rhetoric of wounded outrage is sooner an exercise in opportunism than it is an expression of sincere offense. The notion that today’s Russia is desecrating Circassian graves by holding the Olympics borders is a stretch. Whereas the Russian Empire ethnically cleansed the Circassian peoples from the Black Sea coasts of the Caucasus, the Russian Federation in 1999 passed a law permitting their descendants to return and claim citizenship. Over two thousand Circassians from Turkey and the Balkans have reportedly returned, and another 1,200 from Syria are currently lobbying for expedited return. Moreover, the Umarov’s harsh Salafi interpretation of Islam would never recognize the Circassians, who put little stock into formal Islamic law or practice, as proper Muslims.

Although from a tactical standpoint the attacks in Volgograd were unimpressive –urban public transport is among the softest of targets– the diversity in the cast of characters they involved reveals an unsettling evolution in Russia’s jihadist community. Where once the jihadist movement had been closely intertwined with and parasitical upon the Chechen national cause, the Volgograd bombings suggest that the movement can not only maintain its existence absent a robust Chechen independence movement but can also attract non-Chechens, including Russian converts. If earlier the desire to avenge the deaths of loved ones or the destruction wrought upon the Chechen homeland might have explained the bulk of suicide bombings inside Russia, it can do little to explain the Volgograd bombings. Asiyalova, her convert husband, and Pechenkin all chose armed jihad before they became suicide bombers. Vengeance might make for a more convincing motive in the case of the twice-widowed Aslanova, but her personal history suggests she chose conflict at least as much as it chose her. When the main Russian jihadist website recently crowed that the Kremlin’s worst nightmare is the growing number of Russian converts to radical Islam, it was not an entirely empty boast. The Caucasus Emirate’s proven ability to draw on populations outside Chechnya to produce suicide bombers reveals a sophisticated organizational capacity.

Even as the Emirate’s influence inside Chechnya has declined, its presence elsewhere and especially in neighboring Dagestan has remained stable, or even grown. Dagestan is the poorest and least developed part of the Russian Federation. It has little to offer by way of natural resources, and its gridlocked politics give little reason to expect development to accelerate any time soon. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the republic began to succumb to chronic violence as clan politics, corruption, and radical Islam began to interact. Its population of one and a half million is divided into more than thirty different ethnicities, complicating politics, where ethnic rivalries sometimes overlap with conflicts between police and criminal gangs. Dagestan has a highly masculine culture that reveres pride, honor, and physical courage. Those who display these qualities in opposing overbearing or corrupt authorities often command respect, their own deficiencies notwithstanding. As one small example of this, news stories posted to the internet on the aforementioned Abdullaev’s death are accompanied by comments praising Abdullaev’s courage and condemning the police. Dagestan’s exceptionally rugged topography makes it easy for rebels, renegades, and outlaws to hide. It is a hospitable place for jihadis.

Dagestan will likely continue to suffer from endemic violence for at least another generation. Fortunately for Moscow, the ethnically fractured nature of Dagestani society – as well as the recognition among most Dagestanis that the republic’s prospects would be still worse outside of Russia – has served to diffuse popular frustration and block it from consolidating in anti-Russian sentiment. There is no popular movement against Russian rule in Dagestan.

TROUBLE IN THE HEARTLAND

This, too, will likely not change, but the continued influx of Dagestanis, Azerbaijanis, Tajiks, and others from the Caucasus and Central Asia into Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other Russian cities has been raising tensions between native Russians and the new arrivals to unprecedented levels in the Russian heartland. The presence in major Russian cities of *chernyie* (swarthy people) from the Caucasus and Central Asia is nothing new. But unlike in the Soviet era when the internal movement of people was controlled and Communist internationalism made ethnic chauvinism an ideological offense, today the arrival of migrants is less regulated, on a larger scale, and resented by many Russians who see the new arrivals as interlopers who crowd their cities and bring little of value. Whereas ethnic particularism swiftly asserted itself in most parts of the Soviet periphery at the end of Soviet rule, it has not

yet in Russia. But no longer is such an idea inconceivable.

Indeed, today Russian nationalists openly decry Moscow's subsidies to the North Caucasus. They would prefer to cut the region loose than see their money go to the Caucasus and Caucasians come to Russia's heartland cities. Fights in nightclubs and altercations on the street – quotidian stuff in urban settings – have in recent years sparked mass protests and ugly demonstrations in Moscow when the victims have been Russians and the perpetrators from the Caucasus. For their part, Russian citizens from the Caucasus deeply resent the police and other authorities' habitual use of profiling to harass and extort bribes from them.

Containing ethnic rivalry in the center will be a challenge for the Russian state throughout the coming decade, not least because the temptation for Russian politicians to exploit such animosities to whip up Russian national fervor will be strong. Serial attacks or worse upon the Caucasians in Russia's cities would alienate many North Caucasians. This would redound to the jihadists' benefit, bolstering their argument that a state of war is the only relationship possible between Russia's Muslims and their government.

CONCLUSION: THREE SCENARIOS

Vladimir Putin has a great deal at stake in the Sochi games, and therefore he and his regime are vulnerable. An orderly, well run, and successful games, he hopes, will recall memories of the Moscow games of 1980 and symbolize his success at restoring order to Russia and reinvigorating it as a player to be reckoned with on the world stage. A disrupted or failed games would signal precisely the opposite, and thus Putin's liberal critics at home and abroad in the run-up to the games have highlighted the negative.

Assuming the expected number of spectators do show up, there are three likely scenarios that might tarnish the games. The first would be a case of infrastructural failure. The sheer amount of new planning and construction that had to be done in Sochi coupled with the weakness of law and the regulatory state in Russia make it far from inconceivable that something might go wrong with the new facilities. Everything from a power outage to the physical collapse of a building is imaginable. Such an event would prove an acute embarrassment to the Kremlin, as it would simultaneously underscore both the inability of Putin's Russia to match Soviet achievements and the price that corruption and feeble laws exact.

Whereas even Putin's most ardent liberal critics could hardly be accused of wishing for a hotel to catch fire or a ski-lift cable to snap, many do fervently wish to see a second scenario, whereby one or more protests in favor of homosexual rights cause a sensation at the games. Putin has the least to fear from this scenario. Such demonstrations would have little appeal to the Russian public, who would see them sooner as an opportunistic gambit to tarnish Russia rather than a heart-felt protest against repression. Similarly, abroad they will likely resonate only in Western Europe and the United States, constituencies from whom Putin can expect little in any event.

The third scenario is a terrorist attack carried out by the Caucasus Emirate or those allied to it. Although such an attack would do nothing to rally sympathy from anyone but the jihadists' current backers, it would likely deal two severe blows to the Kremlin. The first would be to humiliate Putin by revealing the former state security agent's impotence after a decade and a half to bring order to Caucasus and to secure even as important a location as Sochi. The temptation of Putin's security apparatus to retaliate against individuals and groups even only tangentially related to the Caucasus Emirate will be strong. The second would be to further inflame ill will against North Caucasians in Russia's large cities. Were something like race riots to occur in cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg, the only beneficiaries would be the jihadists. Using the cycle of violent attack and reprisal to polarize ethnically or religiously distinct populations is one of the oldest and most effective tactics of insurgents. More than anything, exploiting this dynamic by provoking mass retaliation or civil strife in Russian cities offers the jihadists the best chance they have to radicalize larger numbers of North Caucasians and widen their war.

To forestall an attack, Putin has ordered over forty thousand police alone to provide security at Sochi. Thousands more personnel from Russia's military, security, and intelligence services will be deployed as well. They plan to surveil and monitor visitors to the fullest extent technologically possible, and are subjecting all visitors to background checks.

Setting the odds for a successful attack are impossible. As formidable as the Russian security presence sounds, many of the personnel are not well trained. Moreover, the games will be spread out over an unusually large territory, providing enhanced opportunities for terrorists to identify vulnerabilities. The possibility that the Caucasus Emirate has already planted or recruited sleeper elements among the construction workers and service personnel cannot be excluded.

There is little the U.S. can do directly. Due to rivalries between the two countries' intelligence services, the U.S. will send to Sochi a comparatively small contingent of only about forty FBI agents. In the event of an infrastructural failure or breakdown, or even a successful terror attack, the urge to indulge in *schadenfreude* will be strong for those who detest Putin. No doubt some will explain that Putin brought it on himself with his autocratic, illiberal ways. And there is a good chance they will be at least partially right.

Americans, however, would do well to keep in mind two things. One is that not everything that is bad in Russia is Putin's doing, and this applies to the perennial jihadist insurgency in the North Caucasus. The other is that not all of Russia's problems are Russia's alone. This, too, applies to the North Caucasus. Last year's Boston bombings brought this home in the most vivid manner. As radical Sunni militias have taken center stage in Syria's civil war, fighters from the North Caucasus have prominently emerged among them as field commanders. The jihadi international, including al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri, identified the North Caucasus as a promising zone of activity some two decades ago. Those ties remain strong today and they run both ways.

In so far as they burnish Putin's reputation, a successful Olympics in Sochi will likely change little in Russia for the better, at least for the short term. An Olympics disrupted by terror attack, or even by accidental catastrophe presented as a terror attack, however, holds the potential to provoke a sharp deterioration in ties between the Russian center and its North Caucasian periphery. Although the majority of Russians and North Caucasians alike detest the jihadis, frustration between the two is mutual and deepening. At this already unhappy time in the history of Russia's North Caucasus, the further inflammation of relations would benefit neither Russians nor North Caucasians, nor even Americans.

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