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The 22nd Olympic Winter Games in Sochi have already attracted a deluge of international press coverage. The January attacks in Volgograd and reports of possible 'black widow' suicide bombers have brought the issue of terrorism and the security of the Games into focus. The Russian security authorities have established an unprecedented security and surveillance operation, with over 40 000 police and armed forces personnel involved in securing the Games. While every step is being taken to isolate participants from violence, the Games themselves have already become part of the region's conflicts, *writes SIPRI's Neil Melvin*.

In 2007, when Sochi was selected to host the Games, Russian President Vladimir Putin guaranteed that they would be a 'safe, enjoyable and memorable experience'. The Games are very much President Putin's personal project, designed to showcase the new Russia that has emerged under his leadership over the past decade. However, the Sochi Games have also long been viewed in the context of the region's conflicts. Sochi borders Russia's six North Caucasus republics. Over the past two decades, a set of interrelated violent insurgencies has spread through these republics. Russia has struggled to find an effective answer to the violence other than through a massive security build-up, including two large-scale military operations in Chechnya.

The North Caucasus has now become one of the most highly militarized regions in Europe. Tens of thousands have been killed in the region and in violence connected to the conflict elsewhere in Russia. There has been widespread international condemnation of human rights violations in the region. Increasingly, the boundaries of the North Caucasian conflict zone have spilled beyond Russia and intersected with the protracted conflicts of the South Caucasus, creating a larger zone of instability. This development has accelerated since the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia over Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

For the Russian leadership, tomorrow night's opening ceremony in Sochi will also serve as the launch event for a wider programme to develop tourism across the North Caucasus. This programme is intended to economically undercut insurgent movements and help pacify a region that has increasingly been viewed as slipping from Russia's control.

In fact, despite the devotion of over \$50 billion in resources to the Sochi Games—making it the most expensive Winter Olympics ever—there are indications that the Russian Government's plans are already going off-track. Reports of widespread corruption, nepotism and incompetence linked to the Games suggest that the region's population has benefited very little from the mega-project to date. The forced relocation of communities in and around Sochi, the abuse of workers and environmental damage linked to the Games have created new local grievances.

The massive security crackdown ahead of the Games has seen a move away from dialogue and negotiation in the key conflict-affected parts of the North Caucasus in favour of repression. The Games have also reignited historical disputes about Russian colonial policies in the region

Sochi Olympics will leave a questionable legacy

Written by SIPRI

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towards the indigenous Circassian peoples, many of whom died, fled or were expelled following Russian conquest in the middle of the 19th century.

The Games have also affected the fragile and complex situation of the breakaway regions in Georgia, which are recognized by Russia—but not the international community—as independent states. While Russian military forces have justified the construction of security fences, surveillance cameras and border posts in South Ossetia as necessary to counter the terrorism threat to the Games, these actions have also created de facto international borders inside Georgia. In January, Russia announced that it would extend the security zone around Sochi to include a significant part of the disputed territory of Abkhazia in Georgia, prompting the Georgian authorities and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary-General to express serious concern over the expansion of Russia's border.

It is to be hoped that the Sochi Games will be safe and successful. However, the legacy of the Games for the Caucasus conflicts is already mixed. Promoting economic progress in the region is a priority for Russia, not least as part of a broad strategy to address the conflict. Despite this, Russia's vast investments in the Games have not been able to deliver the sort of bottom-up development that is desperately needed in the region.

At the same time, while heavy security measures may be able to suppress the insurgencies for the duration of the Games, they are likely to further exacerbate many of the local grievances that lie at the core of the violence. Ultimately, building a durable peace in the region will require an approach to resolving conflict that has at its core a comprehensive and political approach which addresses the real needs of the local population.

About the author

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