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BOOK REVIEW

Putin's Olympics. The Sochi games and the evolution of twenty-first century

Russia, by Robert W. Orttung and Sufian N. Zhemukhov, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017, 135 pp., £104 (hardback) ISBN: 9780415823722, £38 (paperback) ISBN: 9780367185985, £38 (eBook) eISBN: 9781315817286

It has now become something of a norm for political leaders to justify their intentions in hosting mega-events with claims to turn their cities into 'world class', however vague this is defined. In Russia this was no exception as President Vladimir Putin presented his speech to the International Olympic Committee on 4th July 2007 while making the case for the Black Sea resort of Sochi to host the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. What happened next was a recurrent pattern in the preparations for mega-events: opacity in the planning and delivery of projects; exaggerated benefits with underestimated costs; huge sums of public spending, private profits and corruption scandals; the limited ability of campaign groups and the impacted population to alter the course of events; environmental degradation and the stereotyping by the international press. All this while setting the record for overall costs in USD 55 billion, making the most expensive sports event in history. Nevertheless, underneath this all too familiar script the Sochi Olympic story offers a privileged perspective to examine the contemporary urban, national, and international politics of Russia, which is the focus of *Putin's Olympics*.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this slim book is organised in four thematic chapters. Each deals with a particular dimension of Russian politics that, as the title implies, places the Russian leader at the centre of the analysis. The first chapter situates the Olympic project amidst a wider approach of territorial development led by mega-projects and events. The argument is that such spatially concentrated and capital-

intensive interventions have been used strategically by Putin to satisfy a network of economic and political elites in exchange to their support while infusing a sense of developmental achievement in the society. The focus of the discussion is on the evidence of overspending and corruption in Sochi. Less is said about the actual programme of interventions; what was planned, their rationale, and in which ways it had an impact on the structure of the city and region. After reading the chapter – the shortest of the book – the reader still has difficulty in picturing Sochi or what the Olympic mega-project entailed. This is not only a matter of interest for those keen on urban planning but a relevant issue to assess the legacy claims provided later in the conclusion.

The following chapter touches on some of the issues that gained press coverage such as perceptions on fair political elections in the country, its handling of human rights and the repression of civil liberties. It picks four separate efforts and provides a cursory view on how they sought to raise attention to their agendas: opposition leaders, environmental groups, displaced residents, and LGBT organisations. Each separate account briefly highlights how the Olympic preparations served as a platform to amplify their voices. Nevertheless, only the latter was able to attract wider international support and calls for boycotting the games due the polemic official attitude toward LGBT rights.

The next two chapters examine domestic and international politics taking a detailed view on anti-terrorism operations and the history of the Caucasus region. This is where the analysis is the most original and engaging, supported by a range of sources in Russian. Being Sochi located in proximity to areas marked by political instability, it allowed the Russian government to invest heavily and expand the activities of its armed forces in the region. One of the central claims of the book – the influence of the games

on other events – is demonstrated in highlighting and scrutinising the many links between the preparations of the mega-event and the swift invasion of Crimea on the last day of the sports competitions. Although the authors rightfully steer away from suggestions of cause and consequence, they show how the event provided the necessary pretext for enhancing military operations while key figures and institutions related to the Olympic project became involved in the occupation of the Ukrainian territory. The account also discusses the ethnic tensions surrounding the mega-event, from terrorist groups targeting the Games to the efforts of the Circassian diaspora to raise awareness of competitions taking place on sites where their indigenous ancestors were violently massacred and expelled in the 19th century. At the end, the Games – as a ‘festival of peace’ – did not offer opportunities for reconciliation or averting military aggressions, quite the opposite as the authors claim the annexation of Crimea to be “the legacy of the Sochi Olympics” (97).

Overall, this book captures multiple insights into how the Sochi Olympic project reflected as well as shaped the multi-scalar politics of Russia in the last decade. It covers a breadth of topics though not always with the necessary depth. Nevertheless, it is a relevant contribution to studies on mega-events where there is a tendency for analysis to be bounded by the local scale and by the temporal limits of preparation and staging. It is also relevant for those interested in Russian Studies and in the role of sports in International Relations.

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