

*Center for Strategic and International Studies
Russia and Eurasia Program*

“Sochi 2014: Security and Geopolitical Dimensions”

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Speaker:

Dr. Sergey Markedonov, *Visiting Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies*

Moderated by:

Dr. Andrew C. Kuchins, *Director and Senior Fellow, CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*

Dr. Sergey Markedonov began his presentation by emphasizing the significance of the upcoming 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. In addition to being the first Olympics hosted in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they are also of great symbolic importance to President Vladimir Putin, as they demonstrate that Russia is a power on the rise. Putting the games in a historical context, Dr. Markedonov grouped the upcoming Sochi Olympics with Munich 1972 and Beijing 2008 – opportunities for host nations to demonstrate their evolution and clout. However, due to Sochi’s proximity to the North Caucasus and unusual climate for a winter Olympic host (Sochi is a subtropical city located on the Black Sea), the upcoming games pose a number challenges for the Russian government, particularly security-related. Dr. Markedonov identified five key potential threats facing the Sochi Olympics: 1) instability and terrorism in the North Caucasus; 2) the “Circassian issue”; 3) the Georgia-Russia bilateral relationship; 4) Russia’s policy towards the de facto Abkhaz Republic; and 5) demographic and political dynamics in the Krasnodar region.

Dr. Markedonov stated that political instability and terrorism in the North Caucasus pose a security threats to Sochi in 2014 because it lies close to several terrorist “hot spots” in the Russian Federation. In particular, it is only 100 kilometers from Karachay-Cherkessia and less than 200 kilometers from Kabardino-Balkaria. Even though data from 2012 indicated a 15 percent decrease in the number of terrorist attacks across the North Caucasus, the continued instability in the region remains a potential and potent threat to the security of the Olympic Games. Furthermore, The Dagestani Vilayat of the Caucasus Emirate, the most powerful terrorist organization in the North Caucasus, has threatened to attack the Games. Russian Interior Ministry forces have been engaged in a major counterterrorist operation in Dagestan in an effort to tame this security risk, but the struggle is ongoing and the situation remains critical. According to Dr. Markedonov, turbulence in the North Caucasus also poses a threat to Russia as a whole. The Dagestani Vilayat has claimed responsibility for the bombings of the Moscow

Metro in March 2009, the Nevsky Express (the train line between Moscow and Saint Petersburg) in November 2009, and Domodedovo Airport in January 2011.

Dr. Markedonov presented the “Circassian issue” – lingering questions regarding the Circassian diaspora in Turkey and other countries over recognition the “Circassian genocide” and right of return – as the second potential threat to the 2014 Olympic Games. Following their defeat at the hands of the Russian Empire at Krasnaya Polyana (near Sochi) in 1864, Circassians were expelled from their historical homeland and fled across the Caucasus into Ottoman territories (the vast majority of Circassians reside in Turkey today). Circassians today consider what took place a genocide, as does the Georgian government. Russia, conversely, considers the expulsions a byproduct of conquest. While President Yeltsin did acknowledge the hardship that Circassians faced, the Russian government has offered no acknowledgement of ethnic cleaning or genocide. Furthermore, the timing of the Olympics 150 years following the conquest and expulsions is viewed as a particularly offensive, as Circassian groups have received no official permission for ceremonies marking the anniversary.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Islamism supplanted nationalism as the guiding political discourse of the North Caucasus; though nationalism has never entirely disappeared. Both Ramzan Kadyrov, the president of the Chechen Republic, and grassroots organizations motivated by the “Circassian issue,” on which the Russian government lacks a clear policy position, utilize nationalism to great effect. While remaining loyal to Moscow, Kadyrov has promoted internal cohesion in Chechnya through a potent mixture of Islamic rhetoric and appeals to common history and culture. As for the “Circassian issue,” the campaigns opposing the Sochi Olympics have appealed to nationalist sentiments by placing a heavy emphasis on common history among diaspora groups and stressing the issue of the right of return –placing these arguments within a framework of opposition to the central authorities in Moscow. Dr. Markedonov argued that for Circassians in Russia, there is little benefit to remaining silent in regions where they are significantly underrepresented in politics, a scenario which presents a risk of radicalization.

Dr. Markedonov then discussed the implications of the Sochi Games on the Georgian-Russian relationship. Following the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, Georgian officials discussed boycotting the upcoming Olympic Games, comparing them to the 1980 Moscow Olympics boycotted as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, the newly elected Georgian government of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili has taken a more conciliatory stance towards Russia and promoted Georgian participation in the Games. According to Dr. Markedonov, the normalization of relations between Russia and Georgia remains very much a work in progress. However, small steps have been taken, such as the opening of the Russian market for Georgian wine and Borjomi mineral water. Contributing to this thaw in Russo-Georgian relations, Georgian participation in Sochi 2014 may be considered a step toward cultivating a warmer relationship with Russia.

Dr. Markedonov then turned to Abkhazia, which, he noted, has attracted greater attention recently given its immediate proximity to Sochi. He described the historical dynamics of the Russian-Abkhaz relationship as inconsistent. Though Russia initiated a blockade of Abkhazia during the late 1990s and, in line with policies enacted by then-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, attempted to integrate Abkhazia with Georgia, today Abkhazia enjoys protection from the Russian military. However, Abkhazia’s primary opposition party leader, Raul Khadjimba,

believes it is necessary for Abkhazia to develop its own security structure and not rely entirely on Moscow. Khadjimba argues that such dependence breeds complacency, and permits Russia to act in its own interests, not in Abkhazia's.

The final key security challenge to the 2014 Olympic Games is posed by political events in the neighboring Krasnodar region. Dr. Markedonov noted that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Krasnodar has been considered a very traditional region with its own ideology and sentiments, and has been the scene of a major revival of Cossack culture. Aleksander Tkachev, governor of Krasnodar, is known for his hard line against migrants (particularly of Muslim North Caucasians) and sponsorship of Cossack paramilitaries to "filter" out migrants. While his handling of flooding in 2012 that killed almost 200 people was widely criticized, he is viewed as "politically untouchable" up until 2014 Games due to his involvement in planning and contribution of resources. Following the games, however, Dr. Markedonov emphasized that it remains to be seen how Moscow will handle the controversial governor.

Dr. Markedonov concluded by suggesting that the first subtropical Winter Olympic Games will require from the Russian authorities not only tremendous creativity in public relations but also an enhanced ability to provide security. The Russian government will also have to ensure a reasonable level of inter-ethnic cooperation to guarantee a safe 2014 Olympic Games.

Discussion

The discussion opened with a question from Dr. Andrew Kuchins about the potential for a terrorist attack on the 2014 Olympic Games. Dr. Markedonov stated that he focused on Dagestani Vilayat during his presentation because it is the only group so far that has openly expressed an intention to Sochi. However, this does not mean that other terrorist organizations lack similar intentions.

The following question pertained to Russia's readiness to face difficult security challenges and potential threats to the Games. Dr. Markedonov asserted that Sochi's physical vulnerabilities include narrow Soviet roads that are susceptible to traffic jams and ready seashore access. Therefore, it will be necessary to impose a limit on the number of people in Sochi at the time of the event and provide "effective control" – which may necessitate a registration system. Dr. Kuchins emphasized that the United States' Department of State and the National Security Council have consulted and cooperated with Russian officials and agree that U.S.-Russian cooperation is critical to the security of the Olympics.

The next question was about Russia's response to potential security challenges from underground militant groups and whether the security services should be expanded to prevent hostile acts. In addition, the questioner inquired about "political cleansing" that is taking place in Dagestan, where two prominent leaders having been removed from or left office in the past two years – Magomedshams Magomedov in 2012 and Said Amirov in June of 2013. Dr. Markedonov agreed that security should be enhanced to prevent incidents during the Olympics. However, it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about Russia's attitude towards the situation in Dagestan and whether real changes are actually underway. In the case of Said Amirov (the

former mayor of Makhachkala recently arrested for his supposed involvement in a murder), Dr. Markedonov agreed that Amirov was an important figure despite widespread criticism of his privatization efforts. Dr. Markedonov noted that it remains unclear what might replace Amirov's model of government and what steps can be taken on the part of Moscow to effect real change in the troubled region. Expanding on the issue of security challenges, Dr. Kuchins added that the Tsarnaev brothers' involvement in the Boston Marathon Bombings indicated a failure of the Russian security services as well as on the part of the United States government. Such intelligence failures should prompt the Russian and U.S. governments to enhance their intelligence sharing capabilities to prevent any future incidents.

The next question regarded challenges facing Armenians in Krasnodar and Abkhazia and how this relates to the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. Dr. Markedonov stated that compared to other regions such as Abkhazia, the Armenian community makes up only 15 percent of the Krasnodar population and has little bearing on preparations for the Sochi Games. Regarding Abkhazia, he stressed that the Armenian population is vital for Abkhazia's nation building. Armenians have been very active in the region's economy in terms of tourism and private transportation companies. However, they are dramatically unrepresented – while they make up almost 40% of Abkhazia's population, they currently have only 15% of the seats in the local legislature.

The following question was about Russo-Georgian security cooperation for the Sochi Games. Additionally, the questioner asked about the dismissal of Akhmed Bilalov, a former Russian Olympic Committee member. Dr. Markedonov asserted that Bilalov played an important role, but his dismissal will not undermine Sochi 2014 development projects. As for the prospects for improvements in the Russo-Georgian relationship, Dr. Markedonov stated that cooperation between the two countries will be improved, mostly in the context of the North Caucasus. Dr. Markedonov remained skeptical about the development of a common security agenda with regards to the Olympic Games, but the promotion of bilateral relations and normalization is possible in the future.

The following question was about potential implications for Russo-Georgian relations if the 2014 Olympics were to occur with a major incident, and without one. Unless Georgia had a direct role in providing security, Dr. Markedonov argued that the Olympic Games will not dramatically change the Russian attitude towards the Caucasus or Georgia – Russians have generally moved on following the 2008 war. Turning toward the potential for a terrorist attack, Dr. Kuchins added that any hostile activity during the Olympic Games in Sochi would be inflammatory as it pertains to Russian public opinion and for President Putin – but would not impact relations with Georgia in particular. He stated that the Olympic Games hold a symbolic value for Russia, and both experts hoped the Games will be held without any major incidents.

The next question focused on the dispute between Russia and the United States over the current crisis in Syria and whether Russia's questionable domestic policies, including a crackdown on opposition groups, homosexuals, and press freedom might instigate a boycott by the West of the Sochi Olympics. Dr. Markedonov stated that the tensions between Russia and the United States are not ideological, but are rather based on diverging political interests. He does not believe that the situation in Syria will prompt a Russian invasion, due to the fact that Russia has a small stake in Syria and because of its experience in the 1979 Afghanistan invasion. Dr. Kuchins added

that a boycott of the Olympics would be counterproductive. He disagreed with the U.S. decision to boycott the 1980 Olympics. Boycotts punish the athletes and make the Olympic Games overly politicized, which they should not be. Rather than a boycott, should an imminent and grave security risk arise prior to the Games, the best course of action would be to cancel the event.

The discussion closed with comments from both Dr. Markedonov and Dr. Kuchins on suggestions to the Russian government for how it could better provide a more secure and successful Olympic Games in 2014. Dr. Markedonov suggested that the Russian government should be more sophisticated, pragmatic, and careful as this symbolic event approaches. Dr. Kuchins added that cooperation between the Russian government and Olympic committees responsible for the previous Olympic Games (Vancouver, London, and Beijing) will be necessary to ensure the safety of all present during the event.