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## As Sochi Olympics end, were security fears overwrought?



*Security personnel in Olympic Park at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games.  
(Photo: Winslow Townson-USA TODAY Sports)*

SOCHI – In the weeks leading up to the Winter Olympics, Western fears about Russia’s ability to protect the games from a terrorist attack reached fever pitch. Terms such as “Black Widow” became fodder for nightly newscasts, U.S. lawmakers criticized Russia’s lack of intelligence-sharing and some Olympic athletes even advised their families to stay home.

But as the Sochi games concluded, concerns over security have long since faded into the background. The biggest disruption within earshot of Olympic Park came from a dissident punk rock band that posed no security threat at all.

“We were certain that our security agencies will be able to accomplish the task assigned to them, and I think their work was stellar,” Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Kozak said through an interpreter. “As I said before, security threats today are of a global nature. Of course we were concerned with that, as any government in the world (would be) irrespective of whether you have Olympic games or other mass events. Our law enforcement agencies and special services, in cooperation with all the countries in the world, we fulfilled this task brilliantly.”

For Russia, simply keeping the Olympics safe – even as extremist groups from the nearby Caucasus region publicly threatened attacks – will count as a major victory for the country’s international credibility, aided perhaps by low expectations coming in and numerous reports that made it seem like some kind of disruption was inevitable.

But were the fears unfounded or overwrought? That’s a complicated question, according to Global Rescue CEO Dan Richards, whose company was hired by the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association as a contingency plan in case some sort of security emergency required the team to be evacuated from Sochi.

“If even a minor event had occurred, you’d say, ‘No, it was justified,’” Richards said in a phone interview. “Maybe there was a little unnecessary sensationalizing, but the fact remains this is an area of the world that has risks associated with an Olympics that didn’t exist in previous Olympics, so having an additional level of scrutiny and concern was justified.”

Though anxiety over terrorist threats has preceded previous Olympics – particularly the Salt Lake City games in 2002 and in Athens two years later – the run-up to Sochi was unprecedented in many ways. In late December, a little more than a month before athletes and journalists began arriving for the Olympics, suicide bombers executed attacks on consecutive days in Volgograd, roughly 600 miles away from the Olympic Park, killing 34 people.

The group that claimed responsibility for those attacks, based in the mountainous region northeast of Sochi, had previously threatened to disrupt the games.

Though Russia promised a so-called “Ring of Steel” around the games including more than 40,000 security forces, the bombings led to a whirlwind of reporting about threats including the possibility that a so-called “Black Widow” suicide bomber had slipped into Sochi before the city went on lockdown.

Congressman Mike McCaul, chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, went on Sunday morning talk shows warning of a “high degree of probability” that some sort of terror attack would occur in Russia during the Olympics. The Pentagon acknowledged that two Navy warships would be standing by in the Black Sea in case Americans needed to be evacuated from Sochi.

Once the games began, however, the conversation turned, and security became more of a backburner issue for most visitors.

“Coming over here, with the media hype and everything, it wasn’t that I was feeling unsafe, but I was just unsure of what I was really getting myself into,” U.S. figure skater Ashley Wagner said. “I didn’t really know what to expect.”

“But honestly? My entire time here in Sochi I have felt nothing but safe and secure. I think the way they have everything set up, with the system -- we’re always checking in and out of places, you see security guards all over the place, the fence is pretty intimidating. Once you step inside this Olympic bubble it feels very safe. I have had no security concerns since I got here.”

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Though access to Olympic venues has been stringent, including the need for fans to apply for a “spectator pass” just to get near the park, security has not been overbearing. According to experts, Russia’s reliance on intelligence and securing the Sochi perimeter has been key, while more overt measures – like guards with guns, metal detectors and pat-downs around transportation hubs – have been fairly standard.

The Sochi 2014 organizing committee even outfitted much of its security personnel in purple uniforms to put a “friendly, smiling” face on the operation, Kozak said.

“I think the Russians definitely sent everybody to charm school and tried to put as congenial face on a massive security presence as they could,” Richards said. “In large part, I think they were successful in doing so and our clients, once they got there, were really pleasantly surprised.”

Said USOC chairman Larry Probst: “The security has been great; not overly oppressive, but obviously everybody feels safe and secure.”

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