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As Sochi 2014 Comes to Close, ‘New face of Russia’ is Celebrated ^[1]

ADLER, Russia — The Sochi 2014 Winter Games drew Sunday night to a close, an Olympics intent on projecting the image of a strong and confident new Russia across this vast country and to the world beyond, with a mighty Russian team awakening the echoes of the mighty Soviet sport system to prideful spectator cheers of “Ro-ssi-ya! Ro-ssi-ya!”

Albeit, over 17 days, to the beat of “Get Lucky” by a Russian police choir. And cheerful volunteers yelling, “Good morning!” while dancing to the Black Eyed Peas.

“This is the new face of Russia, our Russia,” **Dmitry Chernyshenko**, the head of the Sochi 2014 organizing committee, said Sunday night at the closing ceremony to more cheers. “And for us, these Games are the best-ever.”

These were the first Winter Games in this country. The last time the Olympics were in this nation, in Moscow, it was 1980, the Soviet Union held sway over what is now Russia and several satellite nations. And the United States, along with several other nations, boycotted.

The giant mascot bear who “blew out” the cauldron Sunday night evoked comparisons to Misha the Bear, the 1980 Moscow mascot, one of the most famous in Olympic history. The

music that accompanied that scene came from 34 years ago, too.

Even so, to underscore the point that this is now and that was then, that Russians are hardly isolated from the strains of western pop culture but really, truly have a sense of humor and can even laugh at themselves, Sunday's proceedings opened with a troupe of shimmering silvery dancers poking fun at the glitch in the opening ceremony — a riff from the snowflake that failed to open 17 days ago into one of the rings in the Olympic symbol. The crowd roared in appreciation.

Moments later, Chernyshenko posted to his Twitter feed:

Rings? No worries... Here they are! [#olympics #Sochi2014#ClosingCeremony pic.twitter.com/OR4hyc1zjB](#)

— Dmitry Chernyshenko (@DChernyshenko) February 23, 2014

In virtually every regard, these Olympics would seem to meet the classic definition of under-promise and over-deliver. Seventeen days ago, the narrative was marked by worry over security, budget, environment, transport, logistics, unfinished hotel rooms and a bevy of other concerns.

The all-in cost of these Games, including infrastructure: a reported \$51 billion, most-ever.

Broader geopolitical issues shadowed these Games, too, including a backlash over the Russian law purporting to ban gay “propaganda” aimed at minors.

History will of course render its long-term judgment.

But as most of the 2,856 athletes from 88 national Olympic committees and the so-called Olympic family pack up and scatter to the four corners of the globe, the immediate verdict is quite clear.

The Russian president, **Vladimir Putin**, bet big on these Games. And he has won his bet.

“What they promised, they delivered,” longtime International Olympic Committee member **Pal Schmitt** of Hungary said Sunday. “A new city was born here.”

There has been much talk, some bordering on amazement, at what the Russians have done. The scope and scale of the facilities here took Western Europe maybe 100 years in the Alps, and at Sunday night's ceremony, the IOC president, **Thomas Bach**, declared, “What took decades in other parts of the world was achieved here in Sochi in just seven years.”

Michael R. Payne, the IOC's former marketing director, said, “Sochi proved a total surprise for everyone — quite possibly turning out to be the best-organized Winter Games ever.”

He pointed out, as did several others, the compact nature of the venues in Olympic Park; the discreet security arrangement that meant firearms were never visible within the Olympic zone; transport that worked and did not get lost; spectacular broadcast images; and a press center unrivaled among modern Games' hosts.

Even the weather largely cooperated. Alpine skiing, always at risk for bad weather, got every

race in on time.

The gay issue proved largely a non-issue. “The reality is we have come here, everybody has been welcomed,” Julie Chu, the U.S. flag-bearer in Sunday’s closing ceremony, said at a news conference Saturday, adding, “I know there was a lot of focus on the anti-gay law ... it has been a non-factor.”

The volunteers, in their multi-colored jackets — 22-plus years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was absolutely a priority that the Russian presentation was bright and vivid, not Soviet red and dour — were uniformly enthusiastic. Some could speak English reasonably, others like exceedingly well.

Bach, Sunday night, said through the volunteers “everybody with an open mind could see the face of a new Russia — efficient and friendly, patriotic and open to the world.”

“Wherever we go, no matter whether we are riding, the bus, waiting for the bus, at a venue watching, consistently, every day, someone comes up to us, and they say, can we take a picture? And they want a picture of us with the American flag in that picture,” said **Marilyn Sowles** of Colchester, Vt., whose husband Ken represents such skiers as Bode Miller, Ted Ligety and Hannah Kearney.

“They really appreciate us Americans coming. They really want to know what we think about the Games. They ask that question earnestly. When we say we have loved it at the Olympics, that the venues have been great, that things have run efficiently for us, but that the reason we love the Olympics most is because of how kind and friendly everyone has been to us — and as you know most of the people at the Olympics are Russian, so we are talking the Russian people.

“When we go home, we will tell the American people how kind the Russian people have been to us. And that touched our hearts. And you can see in their face how proud they are. It matters to them that we have felt their kindness.”

The Russians did not win men’s hockey gold. Canada did, defeating Sweden, 3-0, Sunday in the Games’ final event.

But — after saying time and again to their people and the world that they expected not very much here from their athletes — the Russian team, which included American-born snowboarder **Vic Law** and South Korean-transplant skater Victor Ahn, topped the overall medals count, with 33, and the gold count, with 13.

The Russians dominated figure skating, with 17-year-old Adelina Sotnikova dethroning South Korea’s Yuna Kim in a performance that once again drew attention to the sport’s opaque judging system.

Sochi 2014 marked the first time Russia topped both tables since the breakup of the USSR.

In Vancouver, the Russian team finished 11th in the medals table, with 15 overall and just three gold. That led to a purge of senior sports officials.

The U.S. team, which led the medals count in Vancouver with 37, earned 28 here, second in

the overall count, its best-ever total for a Games outside North America. The Americans won nine gold medals, their best-ever performance at any Winter Games, and dominated the new action sports such as slopestyle — even as the long-track speedskating team went oh-for-Sochi, a debacle sure to come under intense scrutiny in the months to come.

Putin, in a diplomatic coup, dropped in on USA House during the first week of the Games — this even after President Obama's appointment of **Billie Jean King** and others to the White House delegation to the 2014 Games in an obvious rebuke of the Russian anti-gay law.

Larry Probst, the U.S. Olympic Committee chairman and new IOC member, said at a news conference of Putin, "He has really owned the Games. I compliment him and his team as well."

With the benefit of hindsight, even with the pre-Games glitches over the hotels that created such a social-media furor, it should nonetheless be understood that this project did not come together easily. Like Rio 2016, it was often referred to as an "adventure."

As recently as September, an IOC inspection suggested literally hundreds of red alerts that needed to be resolved, with time obviously running short.

Putin, who had taken a personal interest in these Games from even before the day in 2007 the IOC awarded Sochi the Games, convened a meeting and made it abundantly plain to the responsible parties that things not only had to come together but would.

A few weeks before, **Dmitry Kozak**, the deputy prime minister, had essentially taken up semi-permanent residence here from Moscow. It was Kozak who moved things along day to day for the final push — all involved knowing that when they were dealing with Kozak they were dealing, too, with Putin.

"Mr. Putin has been playing an important role in the preparation of these Games, as well as the whole Russian government," Bach said. "If that would not have been the case, we would be sitting here in a very different mood. Only with this effort by the Russian government and Russian people was such a big success possible."

Sochi ended up being so good in so many ways it's now fair to ask:

Is this the new way? Does it take \$51 billion now to do an Olympics? And what about Pyeongchang in four years' time — what can they possibly do to top this?

The South Koreans said Saturday they are hardly going to spend \$51 billion. Try \$9 billion, \$4 billion of which is for a high-speed rail line to Seoul.

What went wrong in Sochi?

Were workers paid — fairly and on time? What about the environmental issues that common sense says go hand in hand with getting so much done in so little time? For that matter, it has been odd to have been by the sea and not, for instance, notice flocks of birds.

What about legacy? Those hotels, now finished, up in Krasnaya Polyana, nestled under the mountain venues? Will they be filled in a year? Or five?

No question, Payne said, that the “pre-Games frenzy” dissuaded many would-be international fans from attending. Thus Sochi didn’t boast the raucous atmosphere of some Games.

“But,” Payne said, “that did not dampen the Russian enthusiasm and passion — and as a winter sports power, they were more than entitled to host a Winter Olympics with their athletes competing for the first time in front of a home crowd.”

Like the guy at the U.S.-Russia hockey game. He told Chicago-based NBC television producer **Bob Vasilopoulos** that he sold five cows just to make enough money to travel from his small village to come to Sochi, to see the Olympic Games:

“I can always work and make money, raise more cows,” he said. “But to see an Olympics in my own country is once in a lifetime.”
