Possible threats to the Sochi Olympics

The new Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili confirmed the position of the official Tbilisi on the issue of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Athletes from Georgia will participate in the Games, the Georgian side is also willing to take part in the security preparations of the Winter Olympics in Russia. At the same time Georgian authorities will not attend the grand opening of the Olympics. But should one consider how often the Georgian officials are changing their minds, there's a good chance that if Moscow makes no statements or takes no actions degrading Georgia during the time remaining to the start of the event, they will be present.

As for Azerbaijan and Armenia, these countries may have some points of tension between each other but they remain loyal towards Moscow, so there must be no confusion on their part as the official visits are concerned.

A similar position in relation to the Olympics is taken by the other two South Caucasus universally recognized international entities – Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, such excessive caution is not needed in respect of Baku and Yerevan. They are quarreling among themselves, but they are at least loyal to Moscow. It was Georgia that could have sprung a surprise in the region. However, the authorities have changed there, and attitudes to the Olympics have changed as well. Although after pilot Ivan Nechayev, who fought in South Ossetia, took part in the Olympic Torch Relay, an informal social movement calling for a boycott of the Games appeared in Georgia, which was virtual at first, but then became quite real. There are about 30,000 boycott supporters, which is not a noticeable amount even for small Georgia.

Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Paata Zakareishvili called the idea of boycotting the Games senselessness from the very beginning. “We lost territory. In comparison with such trouble, a refusal to participate in the Games is a drop in the sea. Moreover, if we talk about improving our relations with Russia, it will not achieve anything good by boycotting the Games and calling on the whole world to follow our example, as Saakashvili and his team members did. On the contrary - the relationship with Moscow will only get worse”, he said to the author. According to him, Mr. Nechayev’s participation in the Olympic Torch Relay does not deserve a tantrum. “I do not think that the Kremlin was engaged, when making a list of Relay participants, in setting a goal to humiliate Georgia by including this pilot in the Relay,” said Zakareishvili.

Another categorical opponent of boycotting the Games in Tbilisi was Kakha Kaladze, the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Energy, and the famous footballer of the Italian “Milan” team in the recent past. “I am against the politicization of sport. The career of an athlete does not last long, and not all have an opportunity to take part in the Olympics. And only a few have such a chance twice. So, I am sure that our athletes must go to Sochi and we wish them to win as many medals as possible,” said Kaladze.

As for medals, Georgian Deputy Prime Minister got excited, of course. Winter sports are not developed well in the country, and one should not expect that someone among a dozen skiers or bobsleighers will take their places on the podium. The prospects of the skater Elene Gedevanishvili are not hopeless, from the sporting point of view – she is a double bronze medalist in Europe, but it would be incredibly difficult to repeat this continental success in the competition against North American, Chinese, Japanese and Korean girls.
Thus, Georgia does not threaten the image component of the Olympic Games.

Azerbaijan is sending two skiers and a figure skating couple to Sochi. All athletes, judging by their names, were naturalized citizens, but nevertheless Baku does not expect medals, repeating the Olympic commandment of Pierre de Coubertin: “The main thing is not the triumph, but the participation”.

The Armenian delegation will be the largest. “We will send no fewer athletes than we sent to the previous Games in Vancouver”, as it was vaguely told to the author by the Armenian NOC, leaving the author to find out himself which four athletes participated in Canada under the Armenian flag.

The chances for medal in Sochi are reduced to the participation of the slalomist Arman Serebrakyan – a U.S. citizen, who can shoot well at any tournament, an Armenian by origin, who is ready to compete for his historic homeland. However, organizational issues with him are still being resolved. The multiplicity of Armenian delegation is also explained by the fact that, according to the interagency agreement, a team of experienced police officers will be brought to the Sochi Games from Yerevan to help their Russian colleagues in providing security.

The head of Armenian Police, Vladimir Gasparyan, commenting on the event, said laconically: “In recent years the Ministry of the Interior of Russia and Armenian police not just cooperate, but actually work together.” In turn, the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Kolokoltchev, confirmed that “Armenian colleagues will be assisting in Sochi and will give us practical help in addressing issues in order to eliminate any threats that exist and may arise.”

Speaking of security threats, experts distinguish three main areas: technology, internal social, and external politically motivated.

Everything is clear with the first one. We are talking about the reliability of the Olympic venues, their resistance to technological, environmental and other accidents. No one is safe from engineering calculation errors, of course. We all remember the tragedy at the last Olympics in Vancouver, when an engineering inaccuracy in laying the track resulted in the death of Georgian tobogganer Nodar Kumaritashvili. We hope that a similar event will not be repeated in Sochi or anywhere else, and all athletes and fans will be alive and well.

The internal social threat means trivial crime that can be faced almost every day in one form or another. Before the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980, the Soviet authorities resolved this issue in a simple way, by purging the city and deporting antisocial elements outside the capital. According to rumors, a secret pact was concluded with the most powerful crime bosses of the time: as David Gotsman from the famous series said - “Sha!”, i.e., no excesses for the period of the Olympics. And this agreement was not violated on the whole.

Moscow is particularly troubled by the group of “external threats”. Russian secret services considered probable provocations on the part of Georgia, as the number one threat to the Sochi Olympics. Perhaps, these fears were exaggerated, but they cannot be called groundless. First, Mikheil Saakashvili, the leader of this country, repeatedly called on the West to boycott the Sochi Olympics. Second, with the support of the Jamestown Foundation, Georgian authorities artificially intensified the discussion of the Circassian issue, especially pedaling the issue that it was unacceptable to hold the Olympics in places of extermination of the Circassian people by Imperial Russia. Third, Saakashvili’s regime taught the whole world that it was ready for any provocation: it was the exploding of buses that brought Georgians from Abkhazia into the Zugdidi District of Georgia to vote in the village of Khurcha in the presence of foreign observers in May 2008, it was incessant demonstrative arrests of “Russian spies”, it was the strange operation against no less strange gangs in the Russian-Georgian border region and, finally, it is the war in South Ossetia. Of course, we must say that the situation, in terms of terrorism, was far from simple at the time of his predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze. In Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge, along with Chechen refugees, hundreds of militants led by the famous Ruslan Gelayev found refuge, and later his detachment was transferred to Abkhazia, where it caused many troubles, but was thrown back in time. However, it was at the time of Saakashvili when the situation completely came out of the forecasted field. Now, with his departure from the political arena, Georgia is providing Russia with firm assurances of loyalty and offering its assistance. And it seems that it can be trusted. In any case, the threat from the Georgian direction has strongly minimized today, if not fully self-destructed.

However, the level of security threats increased a bit from Abkhazia. This is purely hypothetical, it is true, but we must keep in mind the hundreds of refugees from Syria, who have returned to their historic homeland. Is there an absolute guarantee that they are all “asadists” and consider Russians as the friends of their government? God takes care of those who take care of themselves, as they say.
The North Caucasus problem remains a traditional one. Moreover, this, perhaps, is increased by the non-traditional Crimean problem – the extremist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir that is forbidden almost all around the world feels free on the peninsula. What could be on the mind of people who officially propagandize terrorist wars, but have never been caught in the implementation of attacks, is like guessing not even by the tealeaves, but by circles on water caused by a thrown stone? However, the geographic proximity of Crimea to Sochi still is a real headache in this sense.

Of possible troubles from the “extremist wings”, we should probably be ready for actions by supporters of sexual non-traditionalists and lovers of political chants in inappropriate places.

In summary: there are challenges for the Olympics, but they do not seem fatal, or even less irresistible.

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