MINDS ON

If you woke up one morning to discover your government had passed a law banning the promotion of homosexual lifestyles, imposed rules that severely restricted public protests, and enacted legislation labelling humanitarian agencies as “foreign agents,” how surprised would you be? Would these kinds of provisions be tolerated in Canada? What would have to happen to create an environment that would allow for these kinds of laws to pass? What is your personal reaction to each of the measures described above?.

SETTING THE STAGE

When Russia won the bid to host the 2014 Winter Olympics back in 2007, the Russian people responded with jubilation, heaping praise on President Vladimir Putin for bringing the nation out of obscurity and back into prominence on the world stage. In fact, the world welcomed Russia’s efforts to host a truly multi-national, multicultural and unifying event.

Pressing the self-destruct button

But as the Games approached, many wondered if Russia was pressing the self-destruct button. With the world ready to set in motion its traditional Olympic love-fest with the host nation, Russian parliamentarians pushed through a series of laws that left many observers shaking their heads. One vaguely worded law essentially made the promotion and practice of a homosexual lifestyle illegal. Another made non-government organizations (NGOs) who receive funding from outside of Russia identify themselves as “foreign agents.” There was also a law that kept U.S. couples from adopting Russian orphans. The Russian parliament also introduced repressive rules regarding mass assemblies and protests. By the time the Games began in February 2014, many international observers were left stunned by Russia’s blatant disregard for basic human and democratic rights.

Symptoms of larger problems

However, those who are more familiar with modern Russia say the new laws are a reflection of larger problems. Russia is a nation divided. While Moscow and St. Petersburg live in relative opulence, the rest of the nation struggles to make ends meet. Certainly Russia is a rich nation — particularly when it comes to natural resources like oil — but the distribution of wealth sees the rich become richer with the poor left to fend for themselves. An example of this became readily apparent with the out-of-control spending surrounding the Sochi Olympics. The initial costs were set at $12 billion; in the end they ballooned to $51 billion. According to numerous reports, many construction workers — some of whom came from across the country to help build the Games — were not properly paid for the work they completed. Meanwhile, fat-cat entrepreneurs loyal to Putin were able to line their pockets with cash. By some estimates, as much as a third of the Olympic budget is unaccounted for.

Other domestic troubles were also of particular concern to Russia heading into the Olympics.
A few months prior to the Sochi Games, three separate suicide-bomb attacks led to the deaths of 36 people in Volgograd. Meanwhile Chechen warlord Doku Umarov (the alleged mastermind behind suicide attacks that have killed hundreds of Russians) encouraged his followers to use “maximum force” to disrupt the Games in Sochi. This created a heightened sense of pre-Olympic anxiety with Russia mobilizing 100,000 security personnel, building a state of the art electronic surveillance system, and organizing layers of security checkpoints leading into the Sochi Olympic venues to stave off any threats. The blanket security apparatus was designed to show the tremendous strength of “Mother Russia.”

Cold War resurrection?
Attacks on human and democratic rights, wide income gaps between the rich and poor, gross mismanagement of funds, and over the top security provisions in the face of domestic threats — these have all left many wondering if the Putin era is really a resurrection of the Soviet Cold War mentality. Certainly other examples of this approach are not difficult to find. Russia’s support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, despite increasing evidence of atrocities against his own citizens, has put Putin’s regime in direct opposition to countries like Canada, Britain and the U.S. Couple this with Putin’s meddling in Ukraine, where he essentially created and capitalized on tensions (culminating in the annexation of Crimea) and one can see that Putin is not trying to win any points with the West. In fact, the rhetoric that characterized the Cold War seems to be back with a vengeance.

Olympic euphoria short lived
While Russia should have been able to bask in the post-Olympic euphoria that characterizes most Games, the successes of Sochi have been overshadowed by international criticism of a regime that seems bent on self-imposed isolation and a reckless hunger for power.

To consider
1. What laws did the Russian parliament pass to make people question their commitment to basic human and democratic rights?
2. Why were critics concerned about the spending surrounding the Sochi Games?
3. Why were Western democracies like Canada, Britain and the U.S. concerned about the actions of Russia?

Followup
Russia’s legislation targeting homosexuals called for a ban on the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors.” What does this mean? Why is there a danger that this type of language could be used to target a wide range of people? What is implied in the wording of the law?
VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-viewing

Consider the following:

- The 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing cost $44 billion
- The 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver cost $7 billion
- The 2012 Summer Olympics in London cost $15 billion
- The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia cost $51 billion

Note: Summer Olympics tend to run around 300 events in close to 30 sports. Winter Olympics run around 100 events in 15 sports.

1. How do you account for the varying costs of different Olympic Games? What possible explanations could there be for Vancouver costing one amount and Sochi costing so much more?

2. According to one Russian member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), close to 30 per cent of the $51 billion used to stage the Games remains unaccounted for. What does this say about the management of finances relating to the Sochi Games?

While viewing

1. Why is Russian President Vladimir Putin considered to be a polarizing figure?

2. How is modern Moscow an example of opulence and wealth?
3. a) How do most young Russians feel about politics?

b) What does Anton Semenov think of Vladimir Putin?

4. What evidence of local corruption did activist Vera Kichanova share with CBC reporter Nahlah Ayed?

5. Why do many young Russians want to emigrate from their homeland as soon as possible?

6. a) Who is Sergei Pospelov?

b) What does Pospelov hope to achieve one day?

c) According to Pospelov, how has Putin helped Russia?

7. Why was it difficult to predict whether or not the 2014 Winter Olympics would be Putin’s legacy?

8. a) How much did it cost Russia to host the Winter Olympics?
b) What nickname do some critics of the costly event use when referring to the 2014 Winter Olympics?

9. What has gone right under Putin’s leadership? What has gone wrong?

a) Why did many people worry that domestic terrorists could threaten the Games?

b) In the end, were these fears warranted?

Post-viewing

From an athletics standpoint, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi were a public relations success for Russia. The level of competition and sporting highlights captured the world’s attention. However, shortly after the Games ended, Russia became entangled in the domestic affairs of Ukraine — with Russia eventually annexing the Crimean peninsula after a contentious referendum. Suddenly, the Sochi highlights gave way to images of protesters, soldiers, guns and tanks. Write a one paragraph reflection on how Russia failed to take advantage of the positive impact of Sochi by becoming involved in the affairs of Ukraine.
BLANKET SECURITY AND SURVEILLANCE IN SOCHI

Minds on

In June 2013, Chechen insurgent leader Doku Umarov told his followers:

“Today we must show those who live in the Kremlin... that our kindness is not weakness. They plan to hold the Olympics on the bones of our ancestors, on the bones of many, many dead Muslims buried on our land by the Black Sea. We as mujahedeen are required not to allow that, using any methods that Allah allows us.”


Umarov has claimed responsibility for one suicide bombing on a Moscow subway in 2010 that killed 40 people and another suicide bombing at Domodedovo airport in 2011 that led to the deaths of 37 people. In light of Umarov’s threats to the Sochi Games and his ability to deploy suicide bombers to Russian targets, what steps did Vladimir Putin need to take to secure the Games? Should there be any restrictions on the amount of money and resources needed to provide security for the Olympics?

Volatility to the north
With the Sochi Olympics sharing a common mountain range with some of Russia’s most dangerous enemies, President Vladimir Putin knew he had to take extreme measures to ensure the safety of the athletes destined for the Games. Many wonder if he went too far.

Blanket security
To say that Russia spared no expense to stage the Sochi Games is undisputed. Russia spent $51 billion — seven billion more than China spent on the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008 — making it the most expensive Games ever. A hefty chunk of that amount was spent on security. Russia deployed 100,000 security personnel at the Olympics, including 10,000 elite forces who patrolled the mountains looking for threats. Sochi proper and the cluster of venues around Rosa Khutor alpine resort 50 kilometres from the city were equipped with thousands of security cameras. Spectators had to pass a background check before being allowed to attend events and they were subject to numerous searches at the many checkpoints leading to the venues. And just to be on the safe side, Russia dispatched aerial drones, reconnaissance robots and patrol boats, and they put in place sonar systems to ensure they had eyes and ears just about everywhere.

Russia took a page out of the Toronto G20 and G8 Summits of 2010. At those events, summit organizers created protest zones far away from where the leaders were meeting. At the Sochi Olympics, President Putin reluctantly agreed to allow protesters to congregate in an area 12 km from Olympic park.

One step further
While blanket security seemed to be the order of the day from a military perspective, Russia went one step further in the interests of keeping a handle on all aspects of the Games. The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) — the successor of Russia’s infamous KGB — put together an information technology team that created a system of total electronic surveillance for the Sochi Olympics. The system
was able to automatically monitor every phone call, text message, e-mail and social network interaction of every person attending or participating in the Games. The FSB was able to examine the metadata of people using electronic devices as well as read and listen to anything they wanted to. The system was equipped with so-called “deep-packet inspection” ability that allowed the FSB to totally monitor all electronic communications in the Sochi area.

With this in mind, visitors to the Games were encouraged to surrender any expectation of electronic privacy and to leave their regular smartphones at home, bringing an alternate device in its place. They were also told to assume that they were being monitored at all times and even to remove their smartphone battery when they weren’t using their devices.

No major incidents
In the end, there were no major security incidents at the Sochi Olympics. Russia was quick to point out that the massive security presence and blanket monitoring by the FSB’s surveillance network probably deterred the bad guys from trying anything nefarious.

Source:

To consider
One of the most important revelations shared by Edward Snowden when he provided classified U.S. government documents to the media in 2013 dealt with the existence of an NSA surveillance system called PRISM. This comprehensive computer data analysis program allowed the NSA to monitor the metadata of millions of people in the U.S., a practice that Snowden felt was an unnecessary violation of people’s privacy. However, U.S. law kept the NSA from going one step further and reading e-mails and listening in on phone calls (these actions would require a warrant). The FSB’s deep-packet inspection system — called SORM 3 — essentially gathered and stored every form of electronic communication in the Sochi Olympics target area. Russian law doesn’t have the same restrictions when it comes to reading people’s e-mails and listening to their phone calls.

1. What potential problems might Russian citizens face in light of the development of SORM 3? Who else could be targeted via SORM 3 if Russian authorities were to choose to use it?

2. Canada’s electronic spy agency (CSEC) practices the same metadata inspection procedure as the NSA. Is this enough? Should CSEC have the right to read the e-mails and listen to the phone calls of potential enemies of Canada without a warrant?
THE IMPROBABLE WINTER GAMES OF SOCHI

If you watched the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi on television, you had to ask: why wasn’t anyone wearing a winter jacket? Images of athletes cavorting around the Olympic village in light sweaters and TV journalists delivering their stand-ups in thin fleeces made more than a few people wonder if they were watching the Summer Olympics and not the Winter Games. Isn’t Russia supposed to be one of the coldest nations on the planet, especially in February?

The subtropical “Winter Games”
Well it turns out that the Sochi Olympic bid team managed to convince the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that a city on the Black Sea (nicknamed Russia’s Riviera) with a humid, subtropical climate was the perfect locale for the Winter Games. After all, the indoor venues just needed to be properly air-conditioned and the alpine events could be shipped up to the mountains — just 50 kilometres away — where the snow should be plentiful. So what if the average February daytime temperature in Sochi is 10°C. That’s just plain civilized.

In the documentary Putin’s Games, Boris Nemtsov, an opponent of the Olympic bid, said of the selection of the city of Sochi, “You’d have to spend a long time searching the map of this huge country (Russia) to find someplace with no snow. Putin found it.”

Starting from scratch
However, the more pressing concern for those hoping to secure the bid was trying to win over the IOC despite the fact that Sochi had no substantial sporting venues going into the bidding process. Sochi would have to essentially start from scratch — and there would only be six and half years between the selection of the host city and the Games. Once again, the bid team managed to convince the IOC that it could, and would, get things done.

Putin the pitchman
In an effort to shore up the Sochi bid, Russian President Vladimir Putin made sure he met one-on-one with as many IOC members as possible prior to the awarding of the Games. As part of his sales pitch, he vowed to pour as much money as necessary into the Games. Seeing that Russia was building an Olympics with no real athletic infrastructure in place, he promised a Herculean effort to make Sochi an Olympics to remember. The pitch worked and Russia won the right to host the Olympics in the summer of 2007 despite the fact that competing bids looked more suitable for hosting the Games.

They got the job done, but...
With an initial budget of $12 billion, Russia started planning the events and constructing the venues. Few thought that it would be done on time. With the exception of a few hotels, just about everything was completed by the time the world arrived in 2014, and, for the most part, the efforts of the host nation were well received.

However, behind the scenes people were expressing their concern. Most notably, the budget for the Games skyrocketed from $12 billion to $51 billion, making the Sochi Olympics the most costly Games — Winter or Summer — in history. Some critics claimed that widespread corruption had driven the cost of the Games up. Those loyal to Putin were awarded construction contracts with some employees working on building the venues saying they were not paid the wages they were promised. For the most part, their complaints went unheeded. Too many people were lining their pockets for those in power to help a few low-
level construction workers out. In fact, by some estimates, as much as a third of the money allocated for the Olympics could not be accounted for. In the end, Russian political activist (and former World Chess Champion) Garry Kasparov put it best, “Aside from Putin’s particular ability to lobby for it in one-on-one talks, I think the IOC was taken in by the belief that any problem can be solved with enough money.”

Source: The Passionate Eye – Putin’s Games, cbc.ca/passionateeye/episodes/putins-road-to-sochi

To consider

1. How did Russia manage to win the bid for the 2014 Winter Olympics?

2. Why was it surprising that Russia won the Olympic bid in 2007?

3. Do you think Garry Kasparov’s assessment is correct? Was money the main reason why Russia won the Olympic bid?